Peachy Keene

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Peachy Keene

by desolateice

Summary

A weird old man talks to Robby and says a bunch of nonsense about the future. But it's just nonsense right? Just another random weirdo.

Well until he ends up in 1984.

Chapter 1

Gulls called from above, the waves crashed on the shore and the sun beat down on Robby.

He was sitting by the pier, not close enough for trouble or to be caught but close enough to attract tourists. He'd placed his cards on the box in front of him, shuffling them one way then the other, letting the rigged game of chance play out.

He'd made a decent amount so far. Enough for dinner, frozen pizza or a box of cereal he could pick up at the convenience store on the way home. With luck his mom would be home, but he couldn't count on that.

With his last win the group started to disperse and he decided it was time to go back home when a shadow fell over him.

"Sorry, game's over for the night," Robby said sticking his cards in his jean pocket and gathering up his things.

" Robert Swayze Keene?"

Robby squinted up at the guy in the sun.

He didn't recognize him and he didn't look like a cop.

"Who's asking?" Robby asked.

"Name's Fernandez," the man said. "I need to talk to you. How about I buy you a burger or something and I catch you up, if there's time."

"*If* there's time?" Robby asked with a frown.

"Yeah, I don't fully get it. Which is why I need your help."

"My help?"

"It's more like I'm giving up."

"Huh?"

"You play video games?"

"I mean I guess."

“Great. That’ll make this easier. You like sci-fy?”

“Uh I guess?”

Robby followed the guy, holding his board carefully so he could drop it and skate off in a flash if he needed, as they walked to the burger stand and the guy ordered him a burger, fries and a drink.

He didn't feel like he needed to run. The guy didn't seem dangerous.

The guy looked exhausted. Drained. On his absolute last leg.

Hell he looked like the last time he saw his father, only this guy didn’t reek of booze.

“When was the last time you saw your father?”

There it was.

Bait and switch.

Robby eyed the burger with a frown. On the one hand it was bullshit that he had to talk about his father at all, on the other hand he could save the money he made for later and eat the burger and not worry about dinner.

He picked up the burger and perched on a bench nearby.

“I dunno I was five I guess.”

That was the official story anyway. Not one hundred percent accurate but he’d rather know what this guy wanted and who he was before he said anything else.

The man hummed a thoughtful sound before sitting next to him.

“You know I really didn’t give a shit about you for a long time.”

Robby stared at him uneasily, shoving the burger in his mouth.

“I didn’t give a shit about a lot of it to be fair. Who should give a shit about the All-Valley and some dumb karate war?”

“Karate war? What are you talking about?” Robby asked.

“I screwed up already I know it,” the man said with a sigh, sipping his own soda and leaning back against the bench. “You know last time I

got so pissed at the whole thing I gave you every red cent I had and you know what you did with it?"

This guy had lost it. Like that damn bird from the cereal commercials. Maybe he could splurge and buy a box.

"You high tailed it out of town," the guy said with a disbelieving laugh. "Instant game over. But you were being such a little dick. I thought if I fixed one thing you'd get out of my hair but nah."

"Hey man I don't know you."

"I know that," Fernandez said. "But the sucker punch is, I know *you*."

"Because you know my father," Robby said with a frown.

"Yeah yeah King Cobra, Ace Degenerate, two time all-valley champ. I hate him so fucking much."

Was he dead?

Was this guy going to kill him because he hated his dad?

What sort of cruel fate was that?

"I don't—"

"Calm down, listen kid. I'm tired as hell. Do you know how many times I've done this? Do you know where it fucking starts? Every damn time? The same spot. There's like one save point and it's eons back. I can't handle it anymore. I'm tired of fucking going through puberty and getting old. You should only do it once. And I don't have a fucking clue why it's me."

"There's a clinic on—"

"*Robert*," Fernandez said with a growl. "You are currently skipping school, not because you're doing bad in it. You're actually a good student. You *like* school. The trouble is your friends don't. And if they happen to be at school you get in more trouble then you do if you skip and just *happen* to run into them. So you run dime store scams. Unless of course these so called friends of yours find you. Then you run bigger scams. You steal peoples laptops and sell them from your tech support scheme."

Fernandez turned to Robby. "You are a good kid at heart, but you are going to find yourself in some deep shit. You're going to get pissed

that your Dad tries to rekindle his old love for karate so you're going to run a scam to try and hurt him, but all you're going to do is hurt yourself. You're going to get jealous of the people around your father and the people you want to be around, and you're going to break some kid's spine. And then Robert Swayze Keene you'll go to juvie. You'll try and take some other kid under your wing and you'll watch him transform into a villain right under your eyes. Don't believe me, just wait," Fernandez said getting up. "And when all things get absolutely the shittiest, then I'll ask for your help. Because most likely I'll have failed, again."

Robby watched the man kick a rock down the path, throw his drink into a trash can and wander off leaving a cold chill on Robby's skin.

He ate his burger and fries then drank his soda while he boarded home wondering what the hell his father had screwed up this time and how and why he'd gotten dragged into it.

Chapter 2

Robby sat in the Miyagi-do garden listening to his dad and Mr. LaRusso bicker.

He was watching the fish in the pond swim and trying to not get too upset that they were bickering about Miguel and not him.

“Psst, Swayze,” was hissed across the grass and Robby looked up to see a face he hadn’t seen since before his life turned to shit. Before juvie, before sending Miguel tumbling from the balcony, before losing Kenny to Cobra Kai.

“Fernandez,” Robby said.

He was the first student there and his dad and Mr. LaRusso weren’t paying a lick of attention to him so he got up and walked over to the fence where Fernandez was peeking through.

“What the fuck?” Robby asked.

“See I learned long ago that people don’t believe shit unless you do a little fortune telling,” Fernandez said pushing the wooden part of the fence aside so Robby could slip through.

Robby stared at the opening with a frown before anger and curiosity pushed him forward.

“Are you going to tell me the truth now?”

“You ever see Star Wars?” Fernandez asked walking and Robby followed him.

“Yeah.”

“Robby Swayze Keene you’re my only hope.”

“For what?”

“Saving me.”

“From what?”

“Your father.”

“Is he going to kill you?”

“No. I mean I’ve killed him at least once. And LaRusso. Because sometimes you gotta get that shit out of your system,” Fernandez said with an unhinged laugh, stopping when he realized Robby had stopped following him and turned. “Hey man, the universe said no to those solutions.”

“To what?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Fernandez said then seeing that Robby had no intention of taking another step he sighed. “Okay fine, I’m a scientist okay.”

“You’re studying my father?”

“No. I mean yes. But also no. Will you come with me to my lab?”

Robby stared at the car parked a few feet away, wondering if this was the stupidest decision of his life but deciding that whatever it was was better than being picked over again for the thousandth time, before getting in.

He’d expected something impressive when he’d heard lab. But it was really just a decked out garage in a rather unassuming home. He got about five feet into the lab before something stung the back of his neck, he cursed and slapped at it.

“You’ll be fine, it barely hurt,” Fernandez said.

“What the fuck?” Robby asked.

“It’s a hypothesis. You see, every once in a while I hit a game over in a game I’m not an active player in. It’s more like I’m just cruising around and suddenly the world starts over back at the beginning, the only save point there is. I’ve tried everything. And I always end up right back there. The first time it happened I didn’t know it. I was in my fifties, had some kids, a wife, lived a nice simple life and then bam, right back at the beginning and at first I thought it was a dream, so I screwed around, and bam back at the beginning. That was when I realized I was in a time loop.”

“A time loop?”

“A very wonky time loop without rhyme or reason. Generally in stories a time loop pertains to one event that needs to be changed or solved. Or like personal growth but we’re nixing that because I won a peace prize and yet got nada. Which sometimes when I get bored and have enough time I make myself a t-shirt of. Won a peace prize in 2010 and all I got was this t-shirt. Anyway, I’ve narrowed it down over the loops to the main characters. Your father and Daniel LaRusso. Which makes sense since my starting point is always him nailing me in the fucking face in the summer of ’84.”

“What do you *mean* a time loop?”

“Something goes wrong every time round and I wake up suddenly standing at my apartment complex next to the gate in the summer of ’84. And kid, I just want this to be done. I can’t solve it.”

“So why me? What can I do?”

“You’re going with me.”

“Where?”

“1984.”

“No fucking way.”

“Yes way, before lunch.”

“Not a chance.”

“Listen Robert, I never get past this day. That first life, this was the day I got thrown back, after living my happy ending with my wife and kids. And with that injection, you’ll come back with me and hopefully help me figure what the fuck is going on between your father and Daniel LaRusso so we can get this over with and I can live out my fucking life and die of old fucking age like a regular guy.”

“It’s 11:55.”

“That it is.”

“So in five minutes, what?”

“You and I will be in 1984. So here put this on.”

Clothes were shoved in Robby’s hands and he frowned. This guy had lost his damn marbles. But Robby had to admit he was curious even if

the guy was out of his gourd and put them on.

He didn’t feel sick or nauseous so if he needed to escape he could still kick the guys ass and escape. He looked like one of the few adults in his life that didn't know karate.

Robby finished pulling the shirt over his head when suddenly it was bright and sunny and he heard a creak of a gate slam open and he looked at the guy coming through the gate, thin tan noodle arms carrying a suitcase and blue bike, Fernandez was gone and some kid with a *making bacon* shirt was rubbing his face but smiling at the kid coming through the gate.

Chapter 3

“Freddy Fernandez, apartment 17.”

Robby was pretty sure he was hallucinating and instead of focusing on the world in front of him or the kid who’d gotten nailed in the face by the door, he was trying to remember the layout of the garage.

None of this was real.

If he just reached behind him there had been a wrench.

He just had to grab it.

There was nothing there.

It wasn’t a really good hologram. Maybe he’d blacked out and more time had past then he thought.

Maybe these were actors.

Maybe he’d been moved locations. Even though he didn’t remember moving locations or losing time.

“And that’s Robby, Robby Keene,” Freddy said pointing to him.

“Daniel LaRusso.”

Robby looked at the guy in front of him in shock.

There was no way.

That was *not* Mr. LaRusso.

Freddy was grabbing the guys suitcase, walking with him, all smiles like he hadn’t just gotten nailed in the face.

Daniel LaRusso fresh from Newark New Jersey. Moved with his mother.

Robby followed along, helping carry the bike up the stairs listening to the two talk, unable to stop staring.

He could see it, a bit, there were qualities that were there.

His eyes were the same, his brow, but there were differences, he

talked so much more, and just normally. Not all mystic or miyagi-do teaching style.

No this was Daniel LaRusso before Miyagi-do.

“What the fuck?” Robby said after the door shut, after Daniel disappeared into apartment 20 with his suitcase.

Freddy grabbed his arm and dragged him down to apartment 17.

“Listen I get it,” Freddy said. “Breathe.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Fernandez. Freddy Fernandez”

“No way man. Fernandez is an old kook. I’m in a weird lab in the Valley in a garage I just gotta—”

“It’s real,” Freddy said. “And tomorrow we’ll get Daniel and take him to the beach.”

“And he’ll fight my dad,” Robby said softly.

“That’s an option,” Freddy said with a shrug. “Hold on.”

He pushed the door open and kissed an older woman on the cheek, hugging her tight. “Hi Mom.”

“Freddy,” She said warmly. “Who’s this?”

“A friend, Robby, do you mind if he stays with us for a bit? It’s kinda like cousin Vic.”

Her eyes widened in concern and she nodded. “Of course Robby can stay with us. Long as he needs.”

Robby shifted uncomfortably telling her thank you and then following Freddy to a room, his room he guessed, which looked so old, so out dated. No tech whatsoever.

But who was he to really judge?

At his apartment with his mom he slept on the couch.

That’s all his life had been really.

Couch surfing from one home to another.

“So,” Freddy said dropping onto the bed hard like a stone. “I have done this countless times. I’ve broken up the fight. I’ve kept Daniel away from Ali. I’ve done just about everything I can think of and so far it hasn’t done anything. So since we just restart here anyway. Do whatever you can think of. Act however you want and we’ll see what happens. Where we go from there.”

Robby nodded sitting down at the desk chair trying to remember how the story went, how his dad and Mr. LaRusso always talked about it.

It was better than thinking about the questions in his mind. The ones threatening to overtake him and spin him into a panic.

Focus on actions not what ifs.

The next day he was dressed for a September day at the beach.

They picked up Daniel and took the bus to the beach where they spent most of the afternoon playing soccer with a bunch of the guys.

How long had it been since he’d played soccer?

For a moment he felt unburdened, racing across the sand, kicking the ball, catching it and sending it away from his opponents, towards his goal, getting more points than the rest of them.

The only one keeping up was Daniel who had fancy footwork himself, and before he knew it they were fighting over the ball and Daniel was so determined, so…like a dog with a bone that he was truly at teenager, a different person from the Mr. LaRusso he knew and Robby stopped thinking of him as such.

This was just some other kid. And then there was an opening, he caught it thanks to the karate training, the tells, the telegraphing of his own moves and Robby broke the ball free, but Daniel tried to get it and it flew, soared straight into a group of girls who shrieked.

The pretty blonde in their midst got up with the ball looking like she had half a mind to throw it right in their face as they both walked over, Robby feeling sheepish for letting it get so out of hand.

“Sorry we weren’t watching where it was going.”

“Isn’t the whole point to keep your eye *on* the ball?” She asked with an amused look. “Hey how do you juggle?”

Daniel started talking, nonsense really, showing her how to juggle the ball on her knees and then Robby heard the sound of bikes and looked up to see a splash of lights.

His father.

One of those bikers had to be his father.

But which one?

They stayed for a bit up there and then all of a sudden they were coming down, sand flying and getting kicked up by the bikes and then there he was.

“Oh watch this,” Ali said taking the ball and kicking it away.

“Oh, I’ll get it. I’ll be right back,” Daniel said darting off to go get the ball.

Robby didn’t follow, watching the bikes, the one that stopped near the girls, the guy getting off the bike with his helmet and red jacket and biking gloves.

Was that him?

He’d seen that jacket before.

It *had* to be him.

What did he do?

What could one do when meeting their parent before you were born? When you were the same age?

Did he hug him?

Did he punch him?

Did he ask him what the hell?

“Hey Ali, I want to talk to you,” his father said walking around and sinking down next to Ali who’d returned to her group.

“Just leave me alone. We’ve been over all this. I don’t want to talk.”

“Well I want to talk alright?” Johnny said turning off the radio.

Ali flipped it back on.

“What is your problem?”

“Just get out of here.”

There was so much about him that was truly Robby’s father. The way he was crouched down there to be at her level. The way he was desperately trying to plead his case.

Had he ever stopped? Had he just given up?

He moved before he started thinking as his father took the boombox, as he got up, as her voice got sharper. But Daniel got there faster, grabbing the radio Johnny threw into the sand and trying to gingerly hand it back to Ali before it was taken again and Johnny shoved the boombox into Daniel’s hand and shoved him into the sand.

Robby watched his father move, the way Daniel moved as they started to fight, as Johnny got a good hit in and Daniel fell and he rushed in. He blocked Johnny’s movements, the game of chicken he was playing, letting Daniel just rush in to injure himself, drawing the ire onto himself.

“And what’s this? Two of ‘em?” Johnny asked.

He wasn’t going to fight his dad.

They were past this. Even if his dad was being a wound up dick. But he was going to block.

He was going to make it hard as hell for his dad to actually go through with his no mercy bullshit. Even though this, whatever this was was so much less…fiery then all the stuff he’d seen since.

This was child's play. This was easy. Now if he could only keep Daniel from rushing at the guy like a bull then they might survive the fight unscathed.

Robby held out his arm holding Daniel back watching his father, waiting for the moment.

“Whatever man, let’s go," Johnny said, letting his arms drop to his side.

His dad walking away from a fight?

It was the same way he'd tried to do when Robby had tried to fight him. A spark of anger rolled up. At everything. At the world. At the uncertainty of everything. Of how he didn't know if he would even exist anymore.

What would happen if he lived to the future?

Would he be too old for anyone to recognize?

How was he ever going to get home?

And he rushed forward, despite himself, despite knowing it was a stupid thing to do, it went against everything Mr. LaRusso had taught him but he ran straight towards his dad with an angry yell, the fact Johnny had once again turned his back on him and that blonde head turned, and in an instant there was pain and Robby was on his back.

"Keep out of it," Johnny said.

Robby breathed.

He'd sparred with his dad before. A few times during classes. But the pain...

He had always thought his dad with his harebrained ideas was going full tilt, but no, his father had been holding back.

There were tears in his eyes and his nose hurt. His face hurt. He could feel all his teeth and was grateful he hadn't bitten his tongue.

He could hear Mr. LaRusso in his head chiding him for rushing into it.

He could hear Kreese chewing him out for losing, he could feel Silver's disappointed stare.

But all he could see was his father getting on his bike, putting on his helmet and biking away.

"Damnit!" Robby said slamming his fist into the sand.

Daniel was sitting on one side of him, Ali on the other, both looking at him with concern.

"Hey, Keene."

He looked back at Fernandez who gently prodded at his nose.

Robby hissed, pulling away.

“It’s not broken, but let’s go get some ice on that huh?”

Robby nodded, feeling rotten, more so than he had the day before when Miguel was talking a mile a minute to his dad about some movie the two of them had watched, more rotten then when his call to Kenny had gone to voice mail... again.

Ali it turned out had driven, and they squeezed into her car, Freddy saying goodbye to his friends and squeezing in the back with him, Daniel and another girl.

A dark haired girl sat up front with Ali.

She drove them to a convenience store where they went in and bought ice cream and a bag of frozen peas that Daniel handed him, ranting about what a dick that blonde guy was and who the hell did he think he was? Robby should’ve just let Daniel fight him.

“Yeah and if I did you probably would’ve kept at it for 30 years,” Robby grumbled pressing the peas gingerly to his nose. “And make everyone around you go through hell.”

Daniel burst out laughing. “You’ve got such a weird sense of humor man, But don’t worry we’ll get even.”

“No!” Robby said looking up at him. “We’re not getting even. I’m **fine**.”

“That’s how bullies win man.”

“I went after him!” Robby said.

“He started it with Ali first.”

“Oh no,” Ali said. “Keep me out of this. It’s complicated okay?”

“What’s complicated?”

“They were dating till the summer. The break up is still kind of fresh.”

“Susan!”

“What it is! You guys still bicker like you were dating. To new people it looks like you’re a damsel that needs rescuing, but to the rest of us it’s just tired bullshit. Besides that wasn’t even *your* radio.”

“Sorry Susan, I’ll get you a new radio.”

“You better.”

“Wait you used to date him?” Daniel asked.

“They were like the king and queen of the school for two years. Ali dumped him this summer,” Susan said.

“Right after her birthday and right before his,” Barbara said. “It was pretty damn cold.”

“Barbara!” Ali said.

“What? It’s true.”

“We’re just not right for each other,” Ali said with a sigh. “I don’t know who is.”

“Isn’t that right?” Robby muttered sourly.

Had his father ever had a long lasting relationship?

Was that 2 years with Ali it?

He didn’t know if that was pathetic or if it was sadder for himself. For a minute it’d looked like he had something with Miguel’s mom, and he liked Miguel’s mom but it was like he self sabotaged every relationship around him.

Hell Miguel looked at him like he was a god and yet even that relationship got strained as soon as Mr. LaRusso saw Miguel as an actual student and not a cobra.

“Robby right?” Ali asked.

“Yeah.”

“Sorry that you got such a rough welcome to the Valley.”

Robby waved them off. “I’m from the area, I just changed schools this year. Mr. La— Daniel is from further Newark right?”

Daniel smiled at him, it was such a big smile it was nearly blinding and Robby nearly dropped the frozen vegetables.

He'd never seen Mr. LaRusso smile like that.

"Jersey tough," Daniel said with a grin holding up one of his hands in a fist. "You should've let me handle it. I would've gotten him pretty good."

"How's your nose doing?" Ali asked.

Robby shrugged. "Not as bad as breaking a bone. I've had worse."

"School isn't that bad," Ali said. "I know this seems like a pretty awful welcome but really there's the Halloween dance and there's lots of fun stuff to do in the area. If you guys have trouble just find me okay."

"Thank you," Robby said softly.

"Yeah, thank you Ali," Daniel said smiling at her, that blindingly bright smile.

"How about after this I drop you all off at home? You guys took the bus right?"

"Yeah," Freddy said.

Ali nodded walking back to her car. He held the peas to his nose and just listened to the music Ali was playing on the radio and the sound of the car.

At South Seas they climbed out and bid Ali a good night and wished Daniel a good night before he took off in a run up the stairs.

Freddy threw an arm around Robby's shoulder.

"You were so zen there for a minute why the hell'd you rush him?"

"It's nothing."

"You got hit by rushing him man. You can't rush Johnny Lawrence. I know he's your dad but you don't exist yet bud. That fatherly warmth for you isn't there."

"What fatherly warmth?" Robby said sourly.

Freddy gave him a look that seemed like he knew more than he let on

and Robby supposed he did. But he wasn't in the mood.

"Listen can I just go take a shower and sleep? This is all…a lot."

"Yeah of course. We'll tell my mom that you fell off your bike."

Robby sighed, another lie amongst the many he was going to have to keep straight.

School was different but the same.

The bell was shriller.

No one had phones.

He kept searching for his in his pocket but it wasn't there.

The air was filled with smog not smoke and oddly he enjoyed his classes more.

It took him a while to try and figure out what the difference was.

He couldn't put his finger on it.

He felt like he was more engrossed in what he was learning. More challenged than he normally was.

For a moment he thought it was because no one was avoiding him as the guy who broke the beloved saintly Miguel's back on accident.

He wasn't demonized. But he wasn't popular or anything.

He was a curiosity that people were more or less avoiding because of the bruising on his face.

So he wasn't winning friends there.

He talked to Daniel in classes and between classes more or less because Daniel just sort of appeared, holding his books, all relaxed, wearing clothes that fit him and not drowning in oversized suits. The boy yammering every thought that popped into his head wasn't the quiet man Robby knew.

Robby was by default a loner.

He wasn't built that way.

He'd just learned it.

After so many soccer games he'd hoped his father would come to only for him to never show up. While all the other kids talked about their dad's and he just didn't know.

He didn't have any answers for their questions.

Hell he'd thought his father's name was Johnny fucking bastard Lawrence because it was the only way his mother had ever said it and he'd been so confused when he'd been sent to the principal's office when the teacher had asked him his father's name.

His mother wasn't around much either. But she was at least there when it'd counted. When he'd been hurt. And then she'd left to take care of herself and he couldn't fault her for that.

She was trying.

It made it hard to make friends.

He didn't have the newest clothes, the newest shoes, hell he hadn't had a phone for ages, didn't get one till long after his classmates.

He didn't have streaming services to watch the shows they talked about.

He was out of the loop.

An oddity.

It was easier to just be a loner.

So it was weird to have Daniel there. It was like the shocking moment when at the very beginning Demetri had been there. A sudden string bean that didn't have a filter. Tall and awkward and always in need of a rescue.

But unlike Demetri who was always voting to run away for a fight, always determined to ask why, to needle things until he got to the middle of it; Daniel was smaller, and ready to fight.

It was exhausting to try and talk him out of getting his revenge against Johnny.

“Really Daniel, I don’t need you to get revenge for me.”

“But we’re friends.”

“I’m fine.”

“Tell that to your nose.”

“I mean it. Please don’t mess with him. Not for me.”

“But come on,” Daniel said hanging off Robby’s locker, leaning in. “Don’t you want to see him get taken down a peg?”

Robby glanced down the hall at his father surrounded by friends, smiling warmly and laughing and looking so…at peace that it hurt.

He’d thought for a while being a loner was fine, because his dad was one too. And maybe he was a loner because it was in his DNA.

That they just sucked at this shit. But there was his dad, belle of the fucking ball with his cobras all around him.

Sure, maybe he was a dick, but it was better than the way he stumbled around all alone with no one to catch him with his brown bag all twisted up around whatever booze he’d bought.

“Just let him be,” Robby whispered.

For a moment he didn't know if he was talking to Daniel or himself or if it was a wish to some higher power.

He really couldn’t handle any more school karate wars.

No more fights.

He was so damn tired.

“Okay okay, we’re even from the beach.”

Robby looked at him, this lonely kid, and for a moment he was reminded of Kenny, another lonely and lost new kid and that protective urge rolled up.

“How about after school we go exploring huh?”

“Really?” Daniel asked.

“Yeah, I mean they can all tell us what’s cool or whatever but we could also find that out for ourselves. I think that’s the best way sometimes. Determine things for yourself.”

“Let’s do it!” Daniel said.

Robby thought it would be like hanging out with Demetri, or like a little brother like Kenny.

But Daniel was different than both.

To his surprise Daniel was a clown.

He was mischievous.

He ran straight at life with full force but he also stopped a lot to play with dogs he saw and to talk to people, strangers like he wasn’t scared of them or worried.

While walking past a street musician he stopped to dance.

He was the most carefree fun loving teen Robby had ever met and nothing like the version of himself that Robby knew.

“Oh hey look! Let’s go in there!” Daniel said grabbing his hand and dragging Robby into a building before he could see what it was.

The bell on the door chimed and they crept in and then Robby froze as he heard a familiar voice shout.

He saw the life sized cardboard cutout of Kreese, younger and all of a sudden he felt his stomach drop.

Fear rose up as Daniel dragged him deeper into the dojo.

And there standing in white gi’s were the original cobras.

All of them.

Kreese noticed them and didn’t make any move to acknowledge them, just leading the boys through their lesson.

His dad noticed them.

He smirked.

And how many times had he seen that look? Never directed at him,

but always at Mr. LaRusso.

He watched Daniel deflate.

“Let’s go,” Daniel murmured to Robby turning.

Robby was more than happy to leave, surprised at how just hearing Kreese’s voice made him so alert. So ready for a fight at any moment.

This Kreese didn’t even know him.

He was fine.

But tell that to his heart that was racing. The urge to rush in there and tell all those boys to run while they still could, to escape.

They headed across the street to the restaurant his mother was working at and they sat while she brought out food for them to eat and asked about the town and school.

He watched them interact, the way he could tell so easily how they were related, the fast way they spoke.

The way Daniel blushed a little when his mother mentioned all the blondes in town.

“Are there not any in Newark?”

“Not where I grew up,” Daniel said. “You only see them on TV or the movies or like in New York, but then it’s usually dyed you know?"

After dinner they biked around a little more, exploring stores and shops, going into records stores and listening to music and Robby listened to all of the music Daniel loved and tried to think of anything he liked from the era, unsure what had come out and what was still yet to come.

It was a decent first week, perfectly fine Robby thought when he went to bed wondering what he’d do that weekend to keep Daniel and his dad from fighting.

When he opened his eyes he was blinking at the bright sun and he was standing in the courtyard as the gate was kicked open right into Freddy’s face.

Chapter 4

Robby found himself back at the gate in the bright summer sun five more times in the span of a week.

The fastest was 2 days, he'd been at the beach, had chased after the soccer ball, saw his dad and Mr. LaRusso about to have at it and then ran between them only to end up flying into the sand with a punch to the face and a kick to the side and to look up and see both of them had turned to him angrily and had said, "Stay out of it!"

Before his head even hit the sand again with a groan and a complaint on his lips about how he wanted to stay out of it but that the two bastards wouldn't let *anyone* stay out of it he found himself back at the gate with Freddy on the ground holding his face and laughing, unable to stop laughing to the point Daniel who was coming through looked at him like he'd lost it.

They manage to salvage the introduction, barely, and then Freddy continued laughing.

"What?" Robby demanded whirling on him.

"I've never done such a shit job myself. My fastest was when I snapped and killed them. I can't believe you tried to get between them at that point. The way you fucking flew through the air."

"Shut up!" Robby said.

He wasn't in any pain, which was good because it'd hurt like hell.

But he was sick of Freddy, so Robby left, heading out that gate, hands shoved in his pockets.

He was frustrated. He wasn't making any progress. He wasn't doing anything right. And he was sick of the damn beach.

He was tired of everything repeating.

He knew exactly what someone was going to say and when. Like he'd memorized the script, the cues, everything.

He walked and walked and walked until he ended up at the skate park.

But it wasn't the skate park yet and he kicked at the ground of the parking lot that existed there instead in frustration.

"DAMMIT!" Robby shouted before slumping down onto a raised cement block.

He wanted to scream and scream and scream.

Why was he even there?

He should run back and demand Fernandez undo whatever the hell he did.

Sure the future sucked, sure his life sucked but at least he *knew* it.

"Hey, pick a card."

Robby blinked looking at the cards held out in front of him with a frown before picking one, a king of hearts.

He watched the hands, not looking beyond them, too emotionally drained to do anything but focus on just the cards, at the hands that shuffled them, the way the cards flew between hands, the way the magicians at the Magic Castle did it whenever Robby would try to sneak in.

Flourishes.

Showmanship.

He'd heard that magicians liked to practice on people in the street.

He always loved getting stopped by one because usually he caught onto the trick. And there was something fun about being in the know. But he didn't know these movements.

It was new.

So he focused on studying them.

An ace was showed to him.

"No," Robby said.

"How about now?"

A finger tapped at the card and Robby watched it catch on fire, the

card going up and red smoke and leaving behind the king of hearts.

“Holy shit!” Robby said looking up at the magician in surprise, before scrambling and falling backward into the dirt behind him.

He was looking up at his father who smiled at him, happy, pleased, who sat down next to him like it was nothing, like less than an hour ago he hadn’t kicked Robby so hard in the side that he was pretty sure a rib had cracked.

Robby stared at him, a bit like he was an alien from outer space.

What the hell was his father doing in this parking lot doing magic tricks?

How the hell did his father know magic tricks?

Where was his entourage?

Where was that smirk he’d gotten familiar with over the last week or so?

“Want to see another?” Johnny asked, putting one deck of cards away and pulling out a new one from his jacket pocket, it was still sealed the way cigarette packs were and he handed the pack to Robby who opened it.

“Go ahead and shuffle it.”

Robby knew some fancy card shuffles, and he couldn’t help himself. Especially when he caught a look of delight on Johnny’s face when he looked at him. He handed it back to Johnny. He picked the card and working up the courage to ask.

“Where’d you learn magic?”

Johnny smiled softly. “I wanted to learn as a kid. And I begged for a kit all the time, so it was one of the first things my mom asked my step father to get me. He had no patience for it or me. He thought that I’d use it to make friends and when I didn’t he got upset that it’d been a waste of money.”

“But you’re *good,*” Robby said.

Johnny shrugged. “If it doesn’t come with social boosting benefits then there’s no point.”

Robby knew that his father's relationship with his step father wasn't good.

Robby had met the man once and neither Robby nor his step grandfather had been impressed with one another. But he remembered the way his father had laughed after that meeting. The way he'd stared up at his father in surprise, that warmth in his own chest, feeling so proud of himself.

"Fuck him," Robby said.

Johnny laughed, that same warm laugh of surprised delight. "You know most people tell me to just grin and bear it. I mean senior year starts in a few days and then it's all over. It'll be my best year yet. It'll be perfect."

There was so much hope in his face.

"How will it be perfect?" Robby asked.

"I'm on the student board. So I'm helping with the dances, I'm a shoo-in for prom king, and maybe those will give me a chance to talk to my girlfr— my *ex* girlfriend," Johnny said softly. "I screwed up this summer and missed her birthday and she dumped me. I mean I ran over later that night but I was…a bit of a mess. And I've spent the rest of my summer trying to clean up my act. Haven't touched a beer since," Johnny said shuffling the cards one more time. "Check the bottom of your right shoe."

Robby blinked then looked down at his shoe, at the card that he hadn't a clue how it'd gotten there and then he plucked it free and there it was, his card.

"I figure if we just talk and I can show her I've changed, then maybe it'll be fine. I mean I love her. I don't know if she knows that you know? I just need to make sure she knows that. I mean I hope she loves me but I mean—"

He was blushing a little and Robby had never seen his father like that.

He couldn't stop staring.

Johnny laughed and shook his head. "Anyway it might not work out but I gotta try. Then it'd be nice to win the all-valley again. And then the rest of the year I can just chill, you know? *Finally* chill. I'll graduate, I'll move out. Maybe I'll drive around California. I'd love to

do a road trip."

"If you've got so much to do then why are you here doing magic? I mean it's a parking lot," Robby said.

Johnny sighed.

"My stepfather is flipping out so I left, I had to get out. One of his shows isn't going perfect so he's throwing a tantrum. And I just carry these with me," Johnny said. "I mean I don't do it a lot, but you seemed like you could use a pick me up."

Robby watched him carefully put the cards back in their box and then he noticed the bruise on Johnny's wrist, mostly hidden by that red jacket he wore.

His skin went cold.

"Hey, I'm new to town, do you know where I could get my hands on a skateboard?" Robby asked.

"Oh you like skateboarding?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I can show you," Johnny said getting up, putting the box back into the pocket of his jacket.

"You're not driving?" Robby asked following Johnny as they walked down the street.

"Ah, yeah it is LA. You do mostly have to drive everywhere, but I didn't grab my keys on the way out of the house so walking it is for today."

They weren't near the mansion.

Robby followed his father, walking beside him, he couldn't stop staring.

Who was this guy?

He wasn't fighting.

He wasn't doing anything, just being…nice.

He just met Robby, he didn't know it was his son.

Robby didn't exist yet. But there was something soothing about it.

For a moment he felt like he was a kid again, walking beside his father through the streets of LA.

The only difference was his dad had held his hand.

He couldn't hold this guys hand.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking at the head phones around his father's neck, the walkman hidden somewhere in one of his pockets. Some beloved mixtape probably hidden in there.

"Here we are," Johnny said opening the door to a shop and Robby followed him in.

He *knew* this place.

The smell hit him like a punch to the face.

How did he know this place?

"Hey! Welcome!"

Surfboards were lining one wall while skateboards were on another.

Suddenly he was a kid again and he was with his father. His father was picking him up and setting him on the counter. The old man who worked there who'd been working on a board was wiping off his hands on a cloth and coming over.

"Well hey there little man, whatd'ya want?"

"He needs some transportation."

"For the seven seas or for the mean streets?"

"The mean streets. He's going to fly," His father had said smiling at him then turning to the man. "I want him to be free."

There'd been something in the way his father had said that that he hadn't understood.

He'd been so happy about it.

He'd forgotten that his dad had bought him his first board, in this shop.

“Johnny! Hey you brought a friend. You heading to the beach?” The guy said.

It was a shock. It was the same man. Just so much younger.

He ruffled Johnny’s hair with a warm fondness.

“Nah, he’s new and needs a ride.”

“Oh you finally found a skater huh?”

“Guess so,” Johnny said.

“Johnny’s pretty great, he’s worked here the last…how many summers?”

“Too many to count. Ever since you finally said yes to hiring me,” Johnny said with a laugh.

“He hasn’t learned to board yet, but I figure one of these years he’ll let me teach him, but every time I try he grabs one of those and runs straight to the beach.”

Robby watched the man jerk his hand towards the surfboards.

“Not always, sometimes I grab a snowboard and high tail it for the mountains.”

Robby stared at Johnny.

He hadn’t known that his father surfed. He hadn’t known his dad worked here.

He shouldn’t have felt surprised. His mother rarely ever talked about him. And he hadn’t been there to talk about himself. Most of what he knew about his father came second or third hand.

“Alright man, let’s get you set up huh?”

Johnny motioned for Robby to follow, the man tossed him an old board.

“I have one deal, before I let any teen walk out of here with their own board they got to show me they know how to use it, or have someone willing to teach them and I know Johnny will land on his ass, so grab a helmet.”

Robby grabbed one off the shelf and followed the man past rows of roller blades and skates out to the back where a bowl was.

He remembered it.

He remembered the way that old man had shown him the basics while his dad had held him, had ran after him, to catch him but then laughing delighted when he shot across with ease.

"He's a natural!" his father had shouted. "Look at him go!"

He put his helmet on, dropped the board to the ground and took off, ignoring the *wait!* from the owner, dipping into the bowl, shooting down and across the bottom of the old pool and shooting up the other side. For a moment he was weightless, for a moment he was flying, he was free, and then he twisted, turning and landing, the board moving easy, familiar beneath him as he shot across the other side, the perfect chance for a flip.

He could feel the sun, the wind on his skin, the sky was blue, the sky was clear.

It was a good day.

He could hear cheering and he didn't care, twisting and gliding across the the bowl, shooting in the air until it was time for a break, landing on his one hand, the kick, the move that Mr. LaRusso had taught him and, then flipping back to his feet.

The man who worked there looked at him in shock.

Johnny was cheering him on, shouting and clapping.

"Hell yeah that was fucking amazing! Wasn't that amazing Zak?"

Zak nodded. "Yeah, holy shit. Johnny where'd you find this kid?"

"Parking lot a few blocks down."

"You new to town?"

"Yeah."

"Where you staying?"

"South Seas."

“Well if you want a job after school you’ve got one.”

“What?” Robby said looking at him surprised.

“You passed my two qualifications. Johnny likes you and you can board. Johnny only works in the summer and during holidays because he does karate and soccer so he’s too busy, for a nerd he’s such a jock.”

“Hey!”

“So if you’re not on a team, it’s not a lot but, I can also teach you how to build your own boards and ramps and maybe this one can teach you how to surf as a trade if you teach him how to not land on his ass on a skateboard.”

“Hey!” Johnny said scowling at the man who laughed but then Johnny turned to Robby and Robby knew in an instant he was going to teach his dad how to board.

He agreed, got the schedule of when the shop was open and was shown the work t-shirt with the logo on it, a palm tree with a skater riding in front of it and a wave in the back with a surfer on it.

“You can have an old one,” Zak said motioning to a pile of old skateboards in a corner. “We get a lot of skaters who donate their old ones when they buy a new one. Sometimes I use them to teach classes. But they’re up for grabs for kids in the area.”

“The neighborhood hates him,” Johnny said with a grin as Robby looked through the boards.

“That’s because they don’t know fun.”

Robby grabbed a blue helmet and plopped it on Johnny’s head.

“Ready?” Robby asked.

“What? No, wait, we’re doing this now?”

“Why wait?” Robby asked grabbing his arm and dragging him back out to the bowl as Zak laughed. “You’ve got good balance, this should be a breeze, especially since you do karate and surf.”

“Yeah but—”

“No buts, don’t be a pussy,” Robby said grinning when Johnny

frowned but stepped on the skateboard and Robby kicked gently at his feet till he was more balanced. “See? It’s all about balance.”

Robby gently pushed Johnny along the edge of the bowl, walking along side him, doing a few laps until he got used to it. Until he was less stiff.

He expected with his protest that his father would be more wobbly, more uneasy, flailing. A bit like Demetri or— but no the determined look in his eyes were intense.

He was focused.

He was adjusting his weight, instinctively adjusting at the curves to make it easier to move.

“So go ahead and shift to one leg and we’ll go around and you’ll use that foot to push off, to get the wheels rolling.”

Johnny did it.

Music clicked on, rock music that Robby knew his father loved, that he knew of because of listening to it in the old firebird with him. And he watched Johnny’s face change, watched him break free from him, skating easily around the outside of the bowl, the way he’d kick off, the way he’d rebalance, the way he’d settle in all balanced as he glided past at ease.

He learned so fast.

It was ridiculous.

For a moment there was a pang in his chest.

It reminded him of Kenny. That determination to learn, the excitement at getting it, the way he so quickly mastered it.

“Ready to learn how to drop in?” Robby asked.

“Yes!” Johnny said, eyes filled with excitement.

Robby smiled. “Zak do you have elbow, knee and wrist guards?”

“I had a feeling I would like you,” Zak called. “There’s a bunch in that bin.”

Robby walked over to the bright orange bin and dug out some neon

guards.

Johnny was frowning but didn't protest putting them on his elbows, knees and wrists.

Robby walked to the edge of the bowl and grabbing the board he'd picked out and he balanced on the edge.

"So just watch me okay? For the moment. Then I'm going to show you how to do this by helping okay?"

Johnny nodded and Robby shifted his weight and dropped in, gliding across the bottom of the bowl a little.

He did it again and again and then he set his board aside and hopped into the bowl, climbed up a little and held out his arms as Johnny balanced his board on the edge.

"You'll use my leg for the moment until you get it," Robby said patting his right knee.

Johnny balanced the board carefully onto Robby's knee, frowning but determined.

"And you'll lean forward and drop."

"Yes."

Robby smiled, waiting for him to get use to it. Having Johnny balance a few more times. To just get used to it, to getting faster before stepping away and Johnny tried again, dropping and gliding across the bottom of the bowl.

He hopped off and grabbed the board running and hugging Robby in utter delight.

They skated most of the day and then walked down the street to a diner where they got lunch, burgers and fries with shakes and they talked for hours.

There was thankfully money in Robby's pocket.

Enough for food, enough for transport. And with the new job, Robby had plenty to keep him busy and to keep him financed. If he kept this time going long enough.

It was easy to talk to his dad.

Too easy.

He didn't want to stop. And Johnny didn't seem to want to leave.

There were more bruises. On his collarbone, on his stomach when he'd lifted his shirt to wipe sweat off his face after boarding, his back.

It was easy to just assume it was from karate. Hell Robby knew from training at Cobra Kai how easy it was to go home covered in bruises.

He'd gone home bruised countless times after training on the balance wheel in the pond.

But Robby had a feeling that one of the reasons Johnny wasn't rushing home was that that was were the bruising came from.

From Sid.

He didn't know what to do.

He didn't want Johnny to leave, didn't want to send him home.

So instead he invited Johnny back to South Seas. And to his surprise he found Freddy sitting in the courtyard against the nearly empty pool looking up at them in surprise.

"Hey Johnny," Freddy said.

"Hi," Johnny said.

"I'm living with him," Robby said as an explanation. "I was thinking, maybe we could get Daniel and I don't know play cards games or something tonight?"

Freddy looked at him for a moment before shrugging. "Sure, why not?"

"Daniel?" Johnny asked.

"Upstairs, come on," Robby said running up the stairs and knocking on that door.

Daniel opened the door looking at him and then at Johnny and there was something in his face. The way his eyes widened, the way he smiled that seemed weird.

"This is Johnny, we were thinking of playing board games and stuff

tonight," Robby said.

"Nice to meet you," Daniel said hand crossing the threshold and taking Johnny's, shaking it, with two hands and it lingered for a moment.

"Oh hi boys," Lucille said, "You guys can come in and play games if you want."

"Thank you Mrs. LaRusso," Robby said. "Wow it's like you're already settled in."

She smiled. "We had movers who did most of it before we got here."

"What game did you want to play?" Daniel asked.

"I've got cards," Johnny said reaching into his pocket for one of those cards packs.

"Cards works," Freddy said.

"Poker?" Daniel asked.

There was something in his face that Robby couldn't place, something that made it feel like he was walking into a trap, but it was Daniel.

Daniel who became Mr. LaRusso.

So Robby walked in, sat down at the coffee table as Johnny set the cards on the table without a flourish. As Freddy sat down, and Daniel sat across from Johnny.

Lucille left to run errands and they started the game. Playing for nothing and Daniel lost the first round and the second, playing bad hands.

And then Daniel said, "Why don't we make this interesting."

"How so?" Johnny asked.

"I'm new to the area," Daniel said. "How about whoever wins at the end of the night, the all time winner, wins something."

"We're not playing for money," Freddy said flatly.

"Maybe something else?" Daniel said.

“Like what?”

“Loser does whatever the winner wants.”

Robby stared at Daniel in surprise.

“Sure,” Johnny said.

“For how long?” Freddy asked.

“A month?”

Freddy shrugged.

Did he have anything to actually loose?

He knew that look.

But he didn’t like the atmosphere. He didn’t like the look on Daniel’s face.

He couldn’t place it.

It wasn’t a face he’d ever seen Mr. LaRusso make before. Or Daniel. But when he looked at Freddy he didn’t seem surprised or uneasy. And his dad…Johnny looked determined to win.

“Deal,” Johnny said.

Robby held on for dear life as they played.

He was grateful for Trey and Cruz for teaching him how to play.

How to scam it.

He wasn’t trying to win but he didn’t want to find out what Daniel was after.

He’d already been his servant for months when the guy was teaching him Miyagi-do at the dealership.

He’d cleaned enough cars to last a lifetime.

And this was Daniel *before* Miyagi-do. He didn't want to find out.

The night wore on.

Lucille came home, made dinner, handed them all bowls of pasta and

then headed to bed and the chips shifted across the table and he watched in surprise as his father who'd been winning started to loose, and loose fast.

It was like he'd been lured in to a false sense of security and then Daniel smiled as Johnny confidently put down his final hurrah, a straight flush and Daniel put down a royal flush. His smile was so off, so odd. It wasn't the smile Robby was used to seeing on Mr. LaRusso's face.

"Looks like I win," Daniel said scooping up his chips.

Johnny stared at him, stared at the hand, at how close he'd been.

His shoulders straightened and he looked at Daniel and Robby expected him to complain, to say to give them another try, that he'd win if they did it again.

"So a month? What do you want?"

He'd accepted it?

With no cursing?

No anger?

Nothing?

"I was thinking maybe tomorrow you could show me around?" Daniel asked.

"Sure," Johnny said.

"I'd like to get started early. So maybe you should spend the night. Robby's new too, so maybe you could show us what there is to do in this part of LA?"

Johnny looked relieved, relieved probably to have an excuse not to go home.

"Okay."

Daniel grinned a bright as a sun smile.

"Cool, I've got sleeping bags," Daniel said hopping up and disappearing into his room.

They set up on the floor in Daniel's room and it was weird, but also kind of nice and Robby hoped that he wouldn't wake up watching that gate open again. He wanted to see this through a little longer. This chance to get to know his dad before everything went to shit.

Chapter 5

Robby braced himself to wake up to bright sunlight and standing at the gate but instead he woke up to the sound of his father snoring and Lucille LaRusso making breakfast.

It didn't take long for the smell of food to wake the rest of them up and go out to the living room where they sat around the table and ate. Robby noted the warm fond smile on Lucille's face and felt weird that it was directed at him. He'd met her before and she'd been nice but there'd been tension in the house.

Partially because of him.

He'd spent most of his time trying to hide from her, not wanting to be caught, knowing he couldn't hide his affection for Sam and not wanting to be treated…awfully because of it.

After breakfast Daniel turned to Johnny and pointed his spoon at him.

"These two live here, but you don't right?"

"No, I mean I used to live nearby but when my mom remarried we moved in with her new husband."

"So, what's fun to do around here?"

"What'd you do where you used to live?"

"Soccer, karate at the YMCA, hang out at the bodega, cross over the river to explore New York."

Johnny frowned. "I don't think California is going to be nearly as exciting."

"That's what I told Ma. But she told me that the pool would make up for it."

Johnny looked thoughtful. "Well there's the beach. We've got a soccer team. There's hiking and you can wander around downtown. A lot of people like trying to see if they'll spot celebs," Johnny shrugged. "There's all your usual city stuff. Golf 'n stuff, Disney, the boardwalk, theaters, restaurants, museums, but you had a lot of that in New York right?"

“It’s not exciting because you live here,” Freddy said.

Johnny looked at him for a moment, like he had to remind himself that Freddy had been there and wasn’t a new sudden surprise. “True. What do you think?”

“I think the beach party tonight is fun.”

“Did you have beach parties with bonfires where you are from?” Johnny asked.

“We didn’t have a lot of beaches super close, but I mean we had Coney Island.” Daniel said.

“It’s a pre-school hang out,” Johnny said with a shrug. “Good way to meet people.”

“Are you going?” Daniel asked leaning forward.

“I was planning to ride a dirt bike trail with my friends. The trail goes past, so I thought we could pop in maybe…” Johnny said and his face turned a little pink.

“Oh? And why on earth are you blushing?”

“I’m not!”

“You are, you’re turning red! Is there someone who’s going to be there?”

“My ex,” Johnny said looking down at his glass of juice. “Ali Mills. I missed her birthday and she broke up with me over the summer after 2 years. I…she hasn’t been answering my calls—”

“Sounds like you should let her go man,” Daniel said gently.

“I just want her to know how I feel. I don’t think I could handle it if I never got to say it you know? It’s okay if she doesn’t feel the same. If she still doesn’t want to…be together this year. I mean it’s senior year. She’s going off to medical school after this year and my step dad wants me to go to business school. Our paths are probably diverging, but I want this year to go well you know? It’s the last one at this school, with our friends.”

“What do you want to tell her?” Daniel asked leaning closer.

“That I love her,” Johnny said.

Daniel blinked, then grinned. “Well you’ve got to go to that party then.”

It was weird to hear his dad say that he loved someone so easily. So earnestly. And to wonder if this year was the year that fractured that. Was it the fight on the beach? Was it the breakup? Or was it Kreese?

Had he ever heard his parents tell each other that they loved one another? Probably not. He hadn’t been planned after all.

His dad had told him that he loved him. And his mom had told him she loved him. But that was familial.

“I think I have my first request,” Daniel said thoughtfully.

“Yeah?”

“I want to see the city on your bike.”

Johnny blinked, “We’ll have to take a bus to get there.”

“I’m fine with that,” Daniel said before turning to Robby and Freddy. “You mind if I meet you guys at the beach later?”

“Sure, we’ll see you there,” Freddy said getting up.

Robby stared at his father and Mr. LaRusso for a beat longer, not really trusting to leave the two of them alone, but he didn’t have a good excuse to stay.

“Let’s grab a coffee,” Freddy said as they left apartment 20.

“Okay,” Robby said, following him to a cafe a few blocks away.

“So how’d you find him?” Freddy asked after they sat down with their coffee.

“Find who?”

“Johnny. I’ve looked everywhere for him on day one but he’s like nowhere to be found. He’s not in the Hills, he’s not at his friend’s place, he’s not on the beach or at the dojo.”

“He found me,” Robby said.

Freddy frowned. “Seriously?”

“Yeah I guess I seemed upset…”

“That tracks,” Freddy said grabbing some creamer and dumping it into his coffee.

“How does that track?”

“How much do you know about your dad from…now?”

“That he’s a dick.”

Freddy laughed and shook his head.

“Did you know that despite all the shit that goes down he wins prom king?”

Robby stared at him, brow furrowed. “What?”

“Doesn’t matter what I do, he always wins. I’ve spent so much time following Daniel around because I just never can find your dad, so every time it happens it confuses me. Because I’ve been going through this loop so much that I forget all the years before. Your dad was popular. *Is* popular I guess.”

“Popular? The guy who is all by himself? Who pushed everyone away? Yeah right.”

Freddy shrugged. “See for yourself. But the newness of this all is… fun.”

Freddy smiled and there was something unnerving about it.

“Glad someone is having fun,” Robby said sourly, sipping his coffee. “What do we do until the beach?”

“Whatever you want. We weren’t invited to the biking. Which is also new.”

Robby nodded, he’d brought his board and after coffee he took his board down to the shop with Zak and Zak didn’t say anything, just tossed him a shirt with the logo on it that he put on and he skated around out front to drum up business. Enjoying a day of nothing but him and his board until it was time to be at the beach.

To Robby’s surprise Johnny, his cobras and Daniel were already there talking, and Johnny and Daniel waved at him when he arrived. The soccer game hadn’t started and the girls hadn’t arrived yet either.

He was introduced to the cobras in turn by Daniel who seemed excited to have made so many new…

They weren't *friends* right?

There was no way that **one** sleepover had successfully side stepped what was going to be a thirty plus ongoing rivalry.

Right?

If it did then maybe he could tell Freddy to take him home now. He'd beaten the whole time loop in like a month.

"We're waiting for the girls," Daniel explained. "I was telling Johnny that he can't come in all tough, he's gotta take a softer approach."

Robby nodded, listening to them talk about karate and soccer and he wondered at how easily they just let Daniel in. Like because he came with Johnny there was no question about it, no second guessing, and the fact he was helping trying to fix the fundamental thing that drove a wedge between them--

Robby didn't know what to do with himself.

He wondered if he should find some spot to watch, let them take care of it all themselves. So he wandered off to go pick a nice spot to sit near the bonfires and then there the girls came and he was sitting close enough to overhear as Ali frowned at seeing Johnny and his cobras, but then Daniel confidently walked up to her first, introducing himself, making jokes, and then grabbing Johnny by the arm.

"This dork sucks at cards did you know that?" Daniel asked. "He hung out with me yesterday, the new guy in town, or one of them anyway, and welcomed me and then lost, badly. So I told him he had to tell me a secret, and I told him that this secret had to be said to the right recipient."

"And who's the right recipient?" Ali said with her arms crossed.

"You," Daniel said with a big grin. "Just hear him out. If after he's said his piece and you're hands are still washed, that's fine, he'll leave you alone."

"How can you guarantee that?" Ali asked.

"Because he lost, he's gotta do what I say for the whole month."

Ali stared at them both in surprise, and then she laughed and Daniel smiled back and Johnny looked a little embarrassed but he stayed there, he stood tall, and Daniel clapped his back and then came over and sat with Robby.

They watched him.

He watched his dad tell Ali how he felt, the earnest look on his face, the reddening of his cheeks.

“What a sap,” Daniel said softly and Robby turned to look at him. The look on his face was incredibly fond.

When he turned back Ali’s expression had softened and then she held out her hand and Johnny looked at it, then at her and then took it, shaking her hand.

“So what happened?” Tommy asked suddenly from behind Robby.

The cobras had joined him by the fire.

“Friends,” Johnny said with a sigh, but he smiled softly looking at his hand.

“There’s more fish in the sea,” Daniel said bumping against Johnny’s shoulder.

Johnny laughed softly, it didn’t fully make it to his eyes, but it was still a warm look on his face.

Bittersweet.

“So, what now?” Robby asked, partially to them, partially to the universe.

“Soccer? Dirt bikes?” Johnny asked.

“Dirt bikes 100%,” Daniel said getting up. “Can someone share with Robby?”

“Sure,” Bobby said. “I’ve got an extra helmet.”

Robby followed them looking back at Freddy playing with his friends, feeling Freddy’s eyes on him and that wild grin of excitement over new experiences.

Robby put on the helmet and got on the back of the dirt bike behind

Bobby.

He held on as the bike took off, looking out at the setting sun, at the way the water looked, the wind in his face, the way they flew across the trail, the whooping of excitement.

It was weird to be with them. To be on a bike with Bobby. Bobby who came by when he was a kid to check on him, his mother didn't let him at first. But Bobby was persistent, kept trying to plead his dad's case. Explaining grief, or trying, but his mother didn't care. Robby didn't care.

But Bobby bought him toys. Offered to take him to the park, to play catch. He'd been trying to fill in. A temporary band-aid while Johnny was grieving. Drowning.

It'd been nice, but it wasn't the same.

His uncle always tried to cover for his dad. When they both knew deep down it was a waste of time.

Robby found himself sleeping on the floor of Johnny's room. The guys had gone home but Daniel had insisted that they see where Johnny lived and Johnny had protested, shifting his jacket to cover bruises but Daniel had pressed his win, the deal that they'd do what he wanted.

Daniel had been stunned to see where Johnny lived, they'd picked up the bike from Bobby's earlier. Daniel's eyes wide as they walked through the big spacious halls until they ran into a women Robby had never met.

But he knew her instantly.

And his vision blurred.

"You okay?" Daniel had whispered.

Robby blinked, surprised to find himself crying and she seemed even more surprised, dropping the basket she was holding onto a shelf and walking up to him. She smelled like flowers and suddenly he couldn't stop, the tears just wouldn't stop.

"Are you hurt? Are you okay?" She asked concern in her voice.

"Sorry," Robby said, voice wavering, sniffing, trying to stop crying but

unable to, “I just— you remind me so much of someone I didn’t get a chance to meet.”

“Oh,” Laura said so softly, and she pulled him into a hug, hands running gently through his hair.

“He just moved here,” Daniel mentioned softly. “He’s living with a friend, his parents are…not…around.”

“Well,” Laura said pulling away just for a moment to get a look at his face. “Sid’s out, so why don’t we go have a nice soothing cup of tea?” she asked rubbing tears from his cheeks with her thumb.

He nodded and she smiled at him, so warmly that his heart just ached more, and she took his hand, squeezing it gently before leading him through the halls to a big kitchen.

“This is massive,” Daniel said softly in awe.

“Sid entertains a lot for work.” Laura explained leading Robby to a seat and preparing a kettle.

She grabbed a box of different types of tea.

“Johnny grab some mugs dear.”

Johnny grabbed a few from the shelves and brought them out, setting them out before them and getting a container of creamer, honey, and sugar cubes.

The kettle whistled and Laura grabbed it bringing it over and pouring water into each of their cups before sitting across from Robby and taking his hand again, gently rubbing it.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked softly.

Logically he should’ve said no. It didn’t even make sense to himself.

He’d never met her.

“My dad’s mom died like right as my mom went into labor, maybe a bit before, it gets blurry from what I’ve been told. And she looked so much like you. He wasn’t around because of his grief. He just…left. I mean he was still around but out of reach and it was because she…”

“Died before she got to meet her grandson?” She asked softly.

“We only have photos from when she was young and she looks—looked like—” Robby sniffed.

Laura nodded.

It was hard to say it. To remember to say it this way and not, that she was going to die before they’d get to meet.

“I blame her,” Robby said softly. “It’s unfair but I do. If she’d lived. Then maybe I’d have a dad and a grandma.”

“I’m sure your mother is doing her best.”

“She is. She’s in rehab…she’s trying really hard. But what sucks is… that she couldn’t try till now. Like no one tried till now. No one tried for me, they waited until it was convenient for them to try, to bother to try. Now that I’m a senior. Now that I’m no longer their problem. And I could’ve had a dad. I could’ve had a cool dad. I could’ve had a family rather than this ragged broken thing. And I even found someone who I thought saw me. Really saw me for me you know? But he hated my dad and I made one mistake and he threw me away too.”

Laura made him a cup of tea with her free hand and pushed it gently into his hands.

“Your age isn’t easy,” Laura said. "And here's a secret about adults. Most of the time we don't know what we're doing. There's no sudden lightbulb or switch that goes off that tells us how to become a responsible adult or tells us the right path to take to do everything correct. All we can do is what we think is best. And sometimes, that's not good enough, and we fail. Sometimes we even drown." Robby watched her eyes flicker to Johnny and Johnny looked away, tugging at his jacket to cover a bruise on his wrist. "Sometimes we don't know what to do with the hands were dealt because we can't see the right way to go. But I bet you, your grandmother would've loved to have met you. And I bet your family has seen how brave you are, how strong and the path your forging on your own to be proud of you and to see you, and sometimes that inspires change in them. Sometimes when you're drowning all you can do is try to keep your head up above water. And I bet as soon as they saw you were swimming that's why they felt like it was time to do by right by you, to try and get better so that they could come back to you stronger. Or, maybe I'm just guessing, hoping. Because you seem like a sweet kid, and I know, I'm glad to have met you."

Robby sniffed, sipping his tea, while she held his hand, wondering if

he could've had this, if she'd lived longer, moments with her having tea, cookies that she asked Johnny to bring over, things people did with their grandparents. And maybe he wouldn't have just had two broken parents, broken in different ways. But for the moment he didn't want to do anything but sit with her, memorizing everything, including the feeling of her hand in his.

Chapter 6

It was weird to go carefully forward in time, it felt like he was trying to board in the dark when the city's power went out and the sky was moonless. He had no clue what the terrain was like, when he'd trip or fall, when he'd break something, or what lie ahead beyond the stories he remembered.

He remembered that Mr. LaRusso talked about that first semester of senior year, how he'd gotten into a fight on the beach, he complained about Halloween and how he got beat up, but mostly it just had sounded like a lot of random skirmishes leading up to the All-Valley.

He had no save points that he knew of. Just blindly moving forward as best as he could.

They'd made it past the beach episode without anyone fighting.

There were some oddities of course. He knew Mr. LaRusso had dated Ali. But while Daniel could be found in school chatting with her and her friends, he mostly hung out with the guys. With Robby and Freddy and Johnny and his cobras.

It was weird.

So very weird to have Daniel with them, the way he and Tommy would be laughing over some joke, seeing Dutch throw an arm around him, but it got even weirder.

True to his word, for the first month of school, his father did whatever Mr. LaRusso said. It was like living in the twilight zone.

His dad was picking them up after school, playing chauffeur as long as it didn't cause issues with his cobra kai practice.

He drove them all over LA for sight seeing. They hung out at the beach, the zoo, museums, went to the movies. He'd never spent so much time with his father in his life.

And it was fun.

Sometimes other people joined them, but often it was the three of them, Daniel's arm around Robby's shoulder's for another 'show the new people around' tours.

Robby also had a feeling that it could've been worse. That Daniel was being very polite with his power, he was respecting things like school and karate, he wasn't asking to copy off of Johnny's homework or asking him to write essays, he wasn't asking him to steal anything. But there was still that mischievous glint that made him worry, wait for it to happen. It just never did.

Not like Trey or Cruz who had, in kindergarten, caught Robby taking a second cookie because he was hungry and then held it over his head for the rest of year.

And— now as he sat in the Avanti with the wind blowing through his hair while Daniel fiddled with the radio picking a rock station, he wondered— no— he realized they'd been holding that damn cookie over his head for most of his life. It'd just snowballed. The cookie had been a gateway to everything falling apart.

The cookie went to stealing pencils for Trey. To stealing balls from the gym for Cruz. Until they came up with things smarter, more lucrative, more dangerous. For him. Not for them. It was always Robby who was the fall guy if things went south.

He'd assumed that was just what friendship was.

Well, except for when his mom put him in a different school for a few years when they'd lived with his grandparents because his mom had been fired.

Those years had been great.

He'd been in soccer, he'd been on a team, he'd made friends and been separated from Trey and Cruz. But his mother had been miserable. His grandparents had been strict on everything. He knew, he always knew they wouldn't rely on his grandparents forever, but he'd liked it, even though he could never tell his mother that.

He liked that there was someone home when he got home from school. That if he needed to be picked up there was someone there when they said they'd be. He wasn't the last kid to be picked up all the time. Dinner wasn't a frozen pizza or cereal that he made for himself if they had it, usually if he went to get it. His grandparents did the grocery shopping and kept the place well stocked. He didn't have to remind anyone to pay the bills.

He'd even gotten glasses which helped him not squint anymore. He had so much to read. He had so much to learn from his grandparents

on little things, like how to cook and bake, how to grill, how to build stuff with wood.

His grandfather had talked through making a ramp with him for his boarding.

They were going to build it together.

And his grandparents always spoke softly of his father. They were old fashioned and it pissed his mother off. “How about we invite Johnny over for dinner this weekend?”

“How about we invite Johnny to a game?”

“The boy needs his father.”

Robby had liked the idea of seeing his father, but the fury in his mother made him bury it. The shouting matches with his grandparents meant he spent a lot of time in his room, that wonderful year he’d had a room, and he’d listened to music or read books, trying to drown out the sound, because normally…normally he’d chew out anyone who upset his mother, but he…he agreed with his grandparents. And he didn’t want to hear it, what she had to say about Johnny. About the man he only remembered in pieces.

And then his mother had gotten a job and just like that he was moved back.

And he was no longer a soccer champion. He was no longer part of a team. He was no longer a straight A student. He no longer had a room of his own, he no longer had a bed. He was back to skating around the city, to his home, and he was bitter.

So he built that ramp from memory.

And he’d hoped in the hospital that his dad would come.

And he never did.

But Trey and Cruz came and the fact they’d came meant so much to him. His **friends**. *Real* friends who showed up, even if they swiped his food, and stole things from the room and around the hospital, they were still there. They still signed his cast, they still hung out with him for hours watching TV in his room.

It made it feel like everything that year with his grandparents had

been fake. That everyone had been fake. His grandparents hadn't come to the hospital. His friends, his team never came. But Trey and Cruz did. And his mom was there. And he realized maybe that was all he ever needed.

But he missed them.

So whenever he could, whenever he found an opportunity he told Johnny he wanted to hang out his home. Daniel loved it and didn't mind, enjoying the pool, the giant mansion and all the food in the house. And they spent a lot of time in Johnny's room and Robby didn't really care, because what he did instead was he sat with Laura.

He soaked up every thing she said about her entire life. He helped her whenever he could and he learned that she loved card games. She taught him cribbage, a version of canasta, gin rummy, dueling nobels, and cuttle.

He was vaguely aware in those afternoons after school that Daniel and Johnny were having fun, we're listening to music, that they were becoming close friends. But he didn't care. He was getting plenty of time with his father on their field trips. But this time with his grandmother was something he needed. Desperately.

And she was so funny, quick and witty.

It'd started because she'd been sitting outside drinking iced tea with a pack of cards next to her and Robby hadn't known what to say or do. Daniel had grabbed Johnny's hand and demanded he show him his room again, it was their second or third visit and Robby didn't want to walk past Laura without spending time with her.

"I know a few games," Robby said.

She'd looked up from where she'd been watching a bee exploring some hibiscus. "Hmm?" Then she'd looked down at the deck of cards and she smiled passing it towards him. "Sure, what have you got?"

He showed off. He shuffled with that flourish and he watched her smile, it was so similar to Johnny, that spark of excitement in her eyes and Robby wondered, with an ache, what they shared. He'd noticed things when he'd lived with his grandparents, little things that were a part of himself, reflected in them that made it feel like home. But there was so much of him missing, and how much of it had been a home with her?

He did three card monte, just because it was basic, it was simple, it was just silly fun, and she was good, keeping a good eye on the cards before she took them from him with a smile, shuffling fluidly.

It looked simple, but she was incredibly fast with them.

“Let’s play a real game. How about we start with Gin Rummy? You ever play?”

“I know that one,” Robby said.

Hours passed in a flash. They played, talking about what probably felt like nothing to Laura but everything to Robby. She spoke about learning to play as a teen from her grandfather, how she’d used games like it to make a quick buck from time to time, when necessary.

“You’d be surprised how things haven’t changed, in the past, in the early days of even this country itself, gambling could get you by. It just wasn’t frowned on then. Sometimes it could be your job. Life itself was a gamble. It’s how many ended up in California, those early frontier towns, a chance for a better life, that’s a gamble. And we still do it. How many men and women come to LA to hope to be in the movies or television, to act now? That’s a gamble too. But with some cards and a little luck you can change your own luck. Or get yourself in a ton of trouble,” she laughed. “My grandfather had worked at a casino for years, he grew up in Las Vegas and then moved to LA. He had a lot of things to say about it, but mostly that games are enjoyed no matter the time or place, it’s something that makes us human. And we love chance and luck. But it’s when you start betting your own shirt off your back, or you go over what you can truly afford, or in trouble, if you can’t stop, then you gotta stop. You gotta get help. But he taught me every game he knew. My parents hated it. But it got me through some rough spots. When Johnny’s father left us my waitressing job was barely putting food on the table because my bastard of a landlord upped the price even though I’d told him my car was kaput and I needed to take it in.”

She sighed, putting cards down, picking up a few others.

“That was such a shitty few months. Normally I took the bus down to the junk yard and would go fishing for parts. I’d generally find something, because a woman and her car generally got over priced and my grandfather had taught me everything about cars and cards. So I’d do the repairs myself. But this was something too big, it needed tools I didn’t have access to, a garage, so I had to take it in. I had

enough money for one or the other, and then there was food, and I mean I could eat at work but Johnny—he was so small then, and I didn't want to stunt his growth. So I set aside how much I could afford to lose and prepared. If I didn't win anything we'd lose the apartment but we'd still have the car. And that'd be something. So I took a deck of cards to a little club I knew and I played very carefully.

"I doubled. I tripled and then I went home.

"It'd been the most terrifying night of my life, but I didn't show it. I dressed to kill, because no one expects a lady to know what she was doing, so I used that to my advantage. I did the same at the garage, got them to knock about $200 off because they were overcharging me. But as soon as I showed up in a skin tight dress with a short hem line and some nice heels? They paid more attention to me then when I'd arrived in my grease covered overalls because I'd been trying my damndest to save my car myself.

"It's like my grandfather had told me. I had to learn how to play the game. And I did. But it was a gamble. All of it. We could've lost the apartment. The garage could've gone so much worse if they'd tried to call my flirting bluff."

She won.

Five games in a row.

"Now when I gamble I set my winnings aside for Johnny."

That surprised him and he looked at her startled.

"Oh I get that," she said after studying him for a moment, before studying the cards. "You probably think we live here, Johnny's set for life. But Sid, he's a darling to me, but he really didn't want a kid. He told me he had. But he didn't. He wanted something obedient. That did everything perfectly the way he wanted, which children aren't. He'll only give Johnny money if he's jumping through all the hoops Sid has set out for him and only perfectly. That car of his? Johnny saved up the money for that himself, with my secret help. Sid had nothing to do with it. Sid does clothes and food and medicine. All huge things, but not much else. And he wants Johnny to go to college and well…if he doesn't— hell after he graduates high school Sid's already been talking about how the free ride will be over and how he doesn't let freeloaders under his roof. Not that that makes sense. Arguably I'm a freeloader," Laura said with a frown. "So that's why when I gamble, which Sid doesn't care because it's something the rich

do, they gamble, they got to Vegas and play the slots or play the tables, so it's fine, but my winnings, those go into an account for Johnny. A mom does what she can so her kids can be happy and free you know?"

Robby won one game, out of ten.

Normally he would've been frustrated, pissed, would've demanded to know how he'd lost so badly the whole time, but instead he was just impressed, delighted at the time he got to spend with her, and every day he could he went back, and while the game changed, he still got took the cleaners by his grandmother, ever damn time and it was perfect.

Chapter 7

“Halloween,” Freddy said.

“Yeah.”

“Halloween is a—just if we restart, don’t be too upset.”

Robby ignored him, Freddy hadn’t been much use. Robby didn’t have much time for him, instead he was working, he was living, he was spending time with his father, with the cobras, with his grandmother. And there was just so much to experience. Roller discos, arcades, paint ball, movie nights, bowling and so much time spent at the mall.

There was always something to do and his job at the board shop paid for it. It was shocking how cheap everything was.

He spent a lot of time thinking if he was home, how nice it’d be. The money he’d made eons ago at the board walk would’ve lasted him a week in the 80s. If not two. And sure he wasn’t being paid great, but the price of things were so much more manageable.

A dollar actually went far, the coins in his pocket were worth something.

Not just something that frustrated service workers or stores.

He wasn't the only one counting out coins to pay for things, it was normal.

And Halloween was just something else. He was helping out, because Johnny had asked if he wanted to. So after school was over he was helping Ali blow up balloons while Daniel helped Johnny put up decorations.

“What are you going as?” Daniel asked.

“The guys and I are doing skeletons,” Johnny said from where he was up on the ladder. “Do you guys still need a costume? I mean it’s tonight. I’ve got extra makeup I’m sure.”

“*You’re* doing makeup?” Daniel asked amused.

“A skeleton outfit by itself is too boring.”

“Johnny always goes overboard for Halloween,” Ali said. “At least they’re not doing zombies this year.”

“One benefit of having a step father in the film industry was the summer I got to learn practical makeup by sneaking on set,” Johnny said with a grin.

“And now he uses it for evil,” Ali said.

“You’re just mad because you asked me to do your makeup because you wanted to be an alien last year and you didn’t tell me you wanted to be a *pretty* alien, and I made you—”

“A creature from Star Trek,” Ali said with a shudder.

“You gotta be specific.”

“Yeah I didn’t think I had to be.”

“How was I supposed to know you just wanted to be sparkly with colorful normal makeup? You said alien.”

“What *was* fun,” Ali said leaning towards Robby, conspiratorial. “Was that it nearly gave my parents a heart attack.”

“You lived off that high for weeks,” Johnny said putting up a spider.

“So it’s not just…*girly* makeup?” Daniel asked.

Johnny let out an amused snort. “What? You don’t like that I can do makeup?”

“I’m just surprised,” Daniel said. “Do you wear makeup? Like is that why your eyes are like that?”

“Huh?”

“They’re so blue, get back down here so I can take a closer look,” Daniel said.

Johnny shifted so he was sitting on the ladder and kept Daniel away with his foot pressing down on Daniel’s shoulder.

“No way, keep away from me, we gotta finish this.”

“You do! You wear makeup don’t you? No one’s skin is that perfect.”

“Says you!”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re 17 and you look like a baby,”

“I do not!”

“Your skin is perfect.”

“No way, yours is.”

“This is the dumbest argument I’ve ever heard, are they always like this?” Ali asked, rolling her eyes.

“It’s new to me too,” Robby said, tying off a balloon and getting another one, watching them bicker, watching Johnny using the ladder, moving so fluidly to get away from Daniel, so self assured and in so much control of his body that he made it look easy as he slipped around it, out of Daniel’s reaching arms.

It was dangerous. It was dumb. But he looked perfectly fine and in control.

So Robby focused on the balloons.

“I bet you’d be pretty!” Daniel said.

And Robby glanced over, as that seemed to throw Johnny, the ladder rocking, and he slipped. Daniel grabbed him, as they tumbled, toppling to the ground, the ladder clattering loudly.

“Shit,” Robby said running over.

“You guys okay?”

“Yeah, Daniel broke my fall,” Johnny said, looking down at Daniel with concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Daniel said pushing himself up, taking stock of himself. “Yeah I’m good.” Daniel slapped Johnny’s arm. “Don’t scare me like that, you could’ve gotten hurt.”

“Yeah but you caught me," Johnny said with a shrug. “Right?”

“I did but—I’m not around *everywhere* for you to land on.”

Robby held out his hand and Johnny took it carefully getting off of Daniel and then they turned holding out their hands to Daniel helping him up. He looked surprised, then amused, taking both of their hands to help himself up.

Someone else took over the ladder work, so they moved on to signs and Robby finished with the balloons, helping Ali put them around the gym. When he looked back Daniel and Johnny were fighting again, this time with glitter, until they were both sparkling like twilight vampires, not that either of them would know what that meant.

But it amused him greatly and the rest of the preparation went by in a breeze. Until it was time to go and change and Robby realized he didn't have a costume and he didn't have enough clothes here to put something together.

He'd thought, in an instant that he had everything to dress up like someone from the 80s, before he remembered he was in the 80s.

It wouldn't work.

"Hey, you don't have a costume right?" Ali asked, hand gently on his shoulder.

"I don't."

"You know how we're reading 'The Outsiders' in English?"

"Yeah."

"And we went to go see the movie?"

"Yeah."

"If you've got jeans and a brown shirt, I realized I have Dallas's jacket and a necklace and a ring that will work. It's a very simple costume but it's something. If you want. I can bring the jacket and the jewelry and give it to you here."

"That'd be great, thank you," Robby said.

He went home, back to Freddy's and dressed carefully, trying to remember how Dallas had looked in the film, changing his hair style a little. And then he hurried back to the school. Ali handed him the

jacket and jewelry, correcting the finger he first attempted to put the ring on before grinning. “There you are, perfect.”

Robby smiled, walking around, happy to be able to tell people who he was dressed up without having to put much work into it. And the English teacher got excited when she saw him. Talking to Robby for a while about his papers, and how he was so good at writing, and understanding so much of the strife and struggle of the characters and their dynamics and all the symbolism.

And he ate snacks, drank punch and just enjoyed being part of the crowd, part of everything, when he spotted the cobras. A bunch of skeletons. He counted.

Tommy, Johnny, Dutch, Bobby, and Jimmy, they were laughing and hanging out.

Maybe he should’ve asked to be one.

But he liked this literary costume, even if it was based off the film.

He watched them and then there was a sixth skeleton.

He hadn’t missed one.

He must’ve miscounted.

One two three four five…

One two three

One two

If they would stop moving around.

One two three

One two three four

One

One two three four

One two

Well now he was missing one.

He moved through the crowd, enjoying the music, the laughter and fun of his classmates who were excited to see him, praising his simple costume.

Skeletons

One two three four

Okay so one was somewhere else

He danced with his classmates.

Oh there they were.

One two.

No.

There were four skeletons over there.

And two skeletons over there.

That was six.

He made his way over.

As he got closer he recognized Daniel's voice behind his makeup.

Daniel was a skeleton?

"You had Johnny do your makeup?" Robby asked.

"I thought it'd be fun, hey nice Outsiders costume. Dallas right?"

"Yeah," Robby said.

Maybe it was the lighting but his makeup was smudged. Probably from a cupcake or drink or something.

"Hey, Robby you want a hit?" Dutch asked.

Robby blinked noticing the weed.

"Just don't offer him the one Johnny rolled," Daniel said with a laugh. "That's only good for mice."

Were they all high?

He looked at them all. Sure as hell.

Johnny's arm came around him. "Hey, I at least rolled, you didn't help at all."

"We're going to go out back and enjoy these if you want to join," Dutch said.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Johnny said.

Maybe his dad wasn't *that* high.

"I'll hang out," Robby said.

"Good enough!" Tommy said and they headed out the back, a spot hidden by hedges and he watched them light up, passing the blunt around, Daniel, to everyone's surprise blowing smoke rings.

"I also hid some drinks for us," Dutch said, cracking open a bottle of whisky they passed around.

If this…if this is how they'd been on Halloween, this high and drinking, no wonder things went to shit.

Even if it hadn't…he'd watched Hawk. The easy way Hawk took all the anger and frustration from years and just exploded. He'd hurt so many people. But Hawk *could* be nice.

Same with Kenny.

It was a coin flip, how easy it was to get mean, to get hard, to want to destroy whatever was in front of you.

Robby had felt it himself.

He didn't accept the drink. Just listening to them talk about karate, feeling the cool breeze and he looked up. There were no stars now, just like there weren't any in the future. Light pollution in the future but smog he knew wasn't helping now.

One day he wanted to be somewhere where he could see the stars.

He ached to see them.

When he looked back down his dad was laughing about something, he looked so carefree, here amongst all his friends, no crushed heart, no broken dreams, just so alive, so vibrant. Daniel turned towards him

after inhaling, grabbing Johnny's jaw, leaning in and exhaling.

Johnny breathed in and Robby, looked away.

He'd seen people shotgun smoke before, but it was different seeing his **dad** do it. Let alone with Mr. LaRusso.

He waited till he could hear a song he knew, a song he truly liked and then he used it as an excuse to go back inside, back to the dance, needing to distract himself, because it was the 80s.

This was normal.

They were probably all going to shotgun that smoke out there. It was a cool trick. Hell every time he saw it he thought it was cool. Until right then, until he'd seen his dad do it. And then it was just embarrassing on every possible front. And he had no way to explain *why* he was so uncomfortable without making it a bigger deal then it was, so he found someone and danced with them until he forgot about it, until the evening grew long and he saw them dancing and having fun, that silly group of skeletons, and he wondered what it was that Freddy had been worried about.

Chapter 8

November passed quickly into December and Robby found himself at Daniel's birthday party. Freddy was around, watching, with a curious look on his face whenever Robby caught him. Like he was waiting for the other shoe to fall. Like he was looking for the weak point. As if Robby had failed something, missed something important, that even though this was going further than any other before, that it wasn't right. And Robby found himself getting nervous, waiting for everything to fall apart but also wanting to prove that look on Freddy's face wrong.

He had this.

"Do you guys want to come to the All-Valley?" Jimmy asked as Lucille passed out cake.

"Oh sure!" Daniel said. "How do you guys usually do?"

"Johnny here is the two time all-valley champ," Bobby said slapping Johnny on the back and Johnny coughed a little looking a smidge embarrassed.

"I can't believe you never told me!" Daniel said.

"You should come, all of you, it's kind of fun," Johnny said. "Kreese taught us everything and we're stronger because of him. I mean I— I used to be a quiet nerd."

"You? No way," Daniel said with a laugh.

"Oh he was such a shrimp when he joined," Bobby said.

"But it's an art to watch him now," Tommy said. "He's so quick."

"Truly sensei's pride and joy," Dutch said.

Robby felt his stomach turn, he'd forgotten about Kreese.

He'd forgotten, a bit about Cobra Kai. He'd been so busy with literally everything else.

"We'll be there, right Robby?" Daniel asked with a grin.

"Oh, yeah, sure wouldn't miss it," Robby said before the singing,

before Daniel opened his gifts, before wondering what it would be like to be there, with Daniel but for it to be different from every story he'd ever heard.

He wondered though when he followed Daniel through the crowd and into the stands with Freddy and Ali and Susan and Barbara and more people he knew, if he should've skipped it.

But he hadn't ever seen his father at his peak.

All he knew was his father who refused to fight him.

Who turned his back on him, refusing to fight back when Robby had tried to hit him.

When he'd been screaming to be heard, to be seen.

His father who fought ruthlessly but drunk and uneasily.

Who got the shit kicked out of him.

But *this guy*.

As soon as he stepped onto the mat in his black gi, covered in patches it was completely different. He was totally focused. If Robby didn't know cobra kai the way he did, he'd think his father was zen, almost miyagi-do.

And it was strange to watch him. He was so quick. As quick as Kenny. But more strategic. More polished.

He struck so fast and moved out of the way before his opponents could respond. They looked slow, clumsy next to him.

His father was graceful.

Precise.

He caught people's attacks before they could get points and used that against them, scoring fast, one two three and they were out.

They didn't have a chance.

The other cobras were good, but his father was on another level.

It was almost like a work of art.

There were so many parts of Johnny that Robby wouldn't have caught if they hadn't had those months with him.

His balance?

Robby knew that move from watching Johnny skate board with him at the board shop.

That move?

That was from surfing. The quick way he dropped when someone swung at him. That was from a few early mornings when Johnny had come to get him, coffee in hand, one for Robby and had taken him to teach him how to surf.

"A lesson for a lesson, as thanks for the skateboarding," Johnny said.

They'd spent weeks getting up early and being on the beach, as Robby learned how to jump up and to drop down on the board fast without hurting himself. He learned how to crouch, waiting, to balance properly before rising up.

It'd been hard. He'd expected it to be so easy, and they hadn't even gone into the water yet.

And he'd sit, tired, drinking water from a bottle that Johnny had brought and he watched Johnny surf. Watched the way he cut through the waves.

The feints, that was just an exaggeration of the sleight of hand.

His father was fucking cool. A master the like of which Robby had never seen.

"Cool huh?" Freddy whispered and Robby realized he was practically on the edge of his seat. "You should see him on the world stage."

Robby didn't really listen to him, watching as his father climbed up the ranks, the way his own heart pounded, there were so many moves he used, so many combinations that Robby was trying to understand in his own head, how to pull that off and he wanted to learn, he itched to learn, to practice, he wanted to ask his dad to teach him.

And then it was the finals.

It was Johnny and Bobby, and for a moment Robby was reminded of Miguel and Hawk. And he wished on some level that he could try that. To fight against everyone only to get to the end and it's you versus your friend, and how the fight becomes just *fun*. Because that's what it was watching Johnny and Bobby fight.

It wasn't that they weren't taking each other seriously, no, they knew each other well, too well, and they were both skilled.

And it was hard to think of that priest, that man of the cloth that had visited him in juvie, telling him to wait his dad would be there, if they just waited, if they gave him another chance, and then watching that same man, moving with such speed, such grace, such ferocity, a lack of mercy because he knew Johnny could take it.

But the thing was they were smiling. Delighting in each others moves. A showcase of everything they'd learned, a realization that this was it, their last all-valley and win or loose, this journey they'd taken together was their chance to do everything they'd ever wanted.

And he felt a hand grip his arm and he realized Daniel was just as excited about it as him, just as engrossed as Bobby got a point, and Johnny got two, and then Bobby got another. Neck and neck. Tied.

And then his father, did a move he never expected to ever see his father do.

A move his father had only seen once and not in karate context.

The one handed kick that Mr. LaRusso had showed him, tried to teach him. And he watched Bobby's eyes widen in surprise at a move he didn't recognize, and then the surprise changed, the fierce excitement returning and he rushed in, just for the kick to take root, to earn Johnny the final point.

Bobby fell to the mat, and there was silence for a breath before Bobby burst out laughing, his laughter echoing the tournament arena.

"Where the hell did you learn that?" Bobby asked and he took Johnny's outstretched hand, getting up as the announcer got over his shock, announcing the win and the audience exploded, Daniel was up and gone in an instant and Robby cheered so damn loud, so damn proud.

He looked at Freddy and Freddy raised an eyebrow, his grin amused.

“You know, I’ve only seen *you* do that move,” Freddy said.

“You have?” Robby asked, surprised.

“A few times. Or maybe a few hundred times. That is a move I’ve always considered quintessentially a Robby Swayze Keene move. Kind of weird to see it now, here in the 80s. But there’s been a lot of surprises.”

“Well you wanted me to solve everything and break the loop, maybe I’ve done that,” Robby said with a grin.

“Don’t get your hopes up Swayze,” Freddy said clapping him on the shoulder. “You’ll just get crushed.”

What did he know?

This was the longest one they’d had yet and it was perfect.

He’d gotten to spend so much time with his father, with his grandmother.

Daniel and Johnny weren’t fighting. Not in any way that mattered.

Daniel hadn’t been hurt or tormented. He had friends.

No one had fought over Ali.

What more could the universe ask of him?

He’d done a great job. And he was ready to go home now.

He was ready to listen to his music.

He was ready to see his mother.

He was ready to face his own mistakes.

The crowd slowly dispersed and Robby watched Kreese clap the guys on their shoulders proud.

And that was the best part. Johnny wasn’t going to get hurt.

Kreese wasn’t going to hurt him.

After the tournament, after enough time had passed that evening, Robby took his skateboard and the bus.

He wanted to witness it, even if nothing else, he wanted to see his grandmothers face when she saw that Johnny had brought home a third trophy. He wanted to hear them congratulating him. He wanted to see them, his father and grandmother, together and happy. He wanted to see her proud of him.

The mansion was dark, quiet.

The Avanti was parked out front but no other cars.

Well he'd congratulate Johnny.

He pushed open the door, knocking quietly.

He wanted to ask his dad to spar with him.

He walked around, looking for his dad.

Not in the kitchen, not in the living room.

He climbed the stairs.

There was music playing from Johnny's room.

He grinned, grabbing the door, pushing it open.

"Hey Johnny congratulations! You think you could show me a few—"

He blinked. His father was sitting on his bed looking up at him in horror, all the color draining from his face. Daniel…Mr. LaRusso was pulling away from him, looking, to see who had come in, horrified as well.

Robby stammered out something. An apology, quickly shutting the door again.

They'd been making out.

He'd seen tongue.

Their hands were places he hadn't ever wanted to see in relation to his father.

They hadn't been fully nude, but there was no mistaking where that had been going.

His dad and Mr. LaRusso were together, physically,

romantically…lovers.

Chapter 9

“Robby!” The voice called out in a harsh whisper.

“I won’t tell anyone. I don’t care what you guys do!” Robby said quickly, not turning back around, hurrying away from the door. “Congratulations! Happy for you!”

It was bad enough he’d walked in on his mom…how many times?

Though saying he walked in on *her*…wasn’t exactly accurate.

How many times had she brought a guy home not remembering he was home?

To the point sometimes he wondered if in those moments she forgot he existed. It’s why he spent so little time at home if he knew she was dating someone serious. Not if he could help it. Not that she came home just when she was serious.

It was one of the nice things about his dad being a missing piece of his life was he hadn’t had to hear or see what his desires culminated in.

But Daniel fucking LaRusso?

The guy he hated?

If you removed all the things that gave them strife this is what happened?

His dad and Mr. LaRusso had sex?

They jerked each other off in his dad’s room?

The sickened feeling turned into anger as he dropped his board and skated off through Encino hills.

So his dad was a little…gay. He’d always kind of figured that. He’d watched movies with him, watched the VHS’s his dad had left behind, and everything his dad ‘liked’ that Robby had known about was hyper masculine. Full of shirtless guys who could kick ass and had abs for days.

That didn’t mean anything, but he’d spent a very angry middle school era thinking that Trey might've been right when he had said ‘hey

maybe your dad left because he's gay and in the closet and couldn't handle being with y'all because he just wants to whore it up at gay clubs".

It wasn't really a secret in the household how his parents met. He knew his mom danced. He knew they met as coworkers. His mother said a lot of shit about his dad, truly vehemently seemed to hate and loathe him with every fiber of her being, but she did say he was a good dancer.

And because as a small kid she worked there and he hadn't had anywhere else to go, a small part of his childhood before she tried for new jobs included being babysat by dancers of all types and perpetually living in a glittery backstage world.

But when Trey had said that, when he was frustrated and wished his dad was there because then maybe weird other men wouldn't come into the apartment all the time and do shit with his mom and treat him like their kid, like they could boss him around, well he'd punched the shit out of Trey.

Trey's parents were divorcing and a lot of the shit he'd said during that period of time was projections of his own parent's mess. Trey had been such a shit during that time, miserable to be around and always stirring shit up. Making it everyone's problem.

But dammit, what if Trey had been right?

Take everything away and his father fell into bed with Mr. L?

Was that why they never got along?

It was all they could do because they were closeted and not sure the other was into it because they were both so repressed? And a 40 year feud was just sexual tension?

He didn't have a dad because his dad was too emotionally immature to deal with his own shit. And if **this** was that shit? He found himself laughing, hysterically, as he rolled down the hills, making his way the slow way to Reseda.

He knew on some level the 80s were different. The strip club his mom had worked at had drag queen and king nights and they'd talk about it, how nice a world Robby was growing up in versus what they had. He knew about the AIDs crisis, he knew about the people who'd been hurt and killed and the pain and suffering.

But he'd also been raised in an environment where love happened and who cared who you loved because love was a good thing.

Hell his mom's best relationship was when she was being courted by a fancy businesswoman who didn't care that his mom's was experimenting and his mom had said it was trendy and maybe they could get Robby into a nice school because of it.

It was truly one of the nice things to not know who or what his dad was into.

His mom had been very open about whatever. And it was embarrassing. Even if he felt like when it came to love or romance he could talk to her about any of it.

He just didn't want to.

It wasn't like he expected his parents to ever get back together. He was pretty sure his mother would rather eat glass.

She'd said as much most of his life.

But he still wanted his dad in his life.

He rolled to a stop at a red light, frowning, eyes pricking.

Was this what the universe wanted?

Is this why it repeated over and over?

Because there was one right route, one way to avoid all the heartache in the future and it meant—didn't it mean—if it happened, if his dad got his happy ending then Robby wasn't in it.

Robby wouldn't exist.

What was the point of this?

Was the universe telling him that he didn't matter?

He knew he didn't matter.

He knew even though his dad tried that it never felt like enough, that it was always too little too late even though he still wanted it desperately. He wanted his dad to keep trying until Robby decided he was done, ready to forgive him.

But he didn't want his dad to walk away when Robby snapped at him. He didn't want his dad to stop looking for him, chasing after him. He wanted, when he got tired, when he finally felt drained and that anger had gone down to a simmer for his dad to be there to hug him, to catch him when he fell.

Because that's what he remembered.

He turned, away from the direction of Reseda and towards a park and he picked a quiet bench away from people under some trees and he rested his board against it nearby, burying his head in his hands.

He remembered his dad when he was little. He remembered him holding his hand, he remembered being held and his dad was so careful about it, like Robby was the most precious thing in the world.

He remembered when someone bumped into him and how his dad had nearly thrown down in the restaurant and gotten them kicked out, and his dad had chewed the manager out because someone had nearly hurt his kid. He remembered how his dad had crouched down to get to eye level with him, his hands on Robby's shoulders asking him if he was okay, ignoring the manager who had still been pissed.

Robby was fine, but he'd still cried, because he liked that restaurant and he remembered asking if they were banned because *he'd* gotten in the way and his dad had shot the darkest look on the planet to the manager who stammered, surprised by the tears, seeming so focused on Johnny and his rough look that he'd forgotten about Robby.

One of the cooks had come out for a smoke break and had blown smoke in the managers face.

"You can't ban them man, that other guys the one who started it, it's bad optics to kick a family out of a 'family' restaurant because a guy tried to defend his kid from a drunk lecherous bastard. Hell you should've comped their meal."

The manager looked so thrown off and the chef ground out his cigarette and then held out his hand. "Hey kid you ever hear of a chefs table?"

Robby had shook his head.

"How about you and your dad have lunch at the chefs table today huh? On me?"

“You sure?” Johnny had asked none of that same anger or snark or bite to it that he'd had for the manager.

“For Johnny fucking Lawrence, hell yeah man. I saw you in '83.”

His dad had looked so embarrassed and had picked Robby up, following the guy in through a different set of doors than the one they’d left and Robby had wondered for a moment who his dad was, other than a cool badass, that could get them back into a restaurant they’d been kicked out of. And even though he was being carried, even though he felt safe, for a moment he felt like he was being held the way he sometimes held his own teddy bears when he got overwhelmed or scared.

They’d sat in the kitchen, at a table in a corner and the chef asked Robby. “So what had you been wanting?”

Robby had looked at him so overwhelmed that he was back there. He’d been so shy at that age.

“His favorite thing you guys make are the dinosaur pancakes. Most places do a smiley face for kids but you make a whole little dinosaur art piece with fruit and stuff and he always wants that.”

“You like those huh?” The chef asked with a grin and Robby nodded.

The chef looked thoughtful for a moment. “You want chocolate milk with that?”

And Robby had nodded again. Tongue tied. Johnny had chuckled a little.

“That’s his order exactly every time. Dinosaur pancakes and chocolate milk. He also has learned, if it’s possible, that he likes blueberry pancakes the best. That’s not really on the list of things for the kids, but the blueberries look kind of like scales so artistically he loves it. And he loves blueberries. And strawberries and bananas so really your whole dinosaur pancake is a huge winner. So uh…thanks, because this is his favorite and if I got him banned…”

“You’re not going to get banned,” the chef said waving that notion off. “I won’t let it happen. You guys are regulars. The manager is just a dick, but managers are a dime a dozen. We’ve been through 5 this year alone. And what about you huh? You having what he’s having?”

His dad had blinked, surprised, a light pinkness on his cheeks and the

chef had grinned.

“Hey man back here half the staff wants a dinosaur pancake before we get started. We can whip that up for you in an instant.”

Robby had been delighted. Delighted that they were getting the same thing, that their little table was going to have two dinosaurs on it. And it’d been fun to watch them work, to watch the chaotic hubbub of the kitchens, a part of it, but far enough away to avoid being in the way or disrupting anything.

It reminded him of being backstage while his mom was getting ready.

Everyone was always in a rush, which was why he liked spending time with his dad. His dad was chill and the times when he showed up he was there. He was holding Robby’s hand, listening to him about whatever, with no rush or hurry in the world, no *let’s talk about it later*.

When he had time with his dad he *truly* had time with his dad.

It was the only time other than when he got hurt an adult fully paid attention to him.

And he missed it.

And what was the point?

His total existence was a byproduct of his father’s unhappiness. And the universe just told him in no uncertain terms that the happiest future didn’t have him in it.

Which meant no more dinosaur pancakes.

No being carried on his father’s shoulders.

No learning to board.

No ice cream that one time after soccer his dad had shown up and taken him to get some.

Nothing.

He wouldn’t exist.

He was a loose end in the universe.

And as he sat on that bench something bothered him.

His dad he got.

But Mr. LaRusso?

His dad was repressed sure. He'd been burned so many times, it made sense that he wouldn't strike first and would let 40 years of closeted feelings that he didn't understand explode into a karate war.

But Mr. LaRusso?

Mr. Family man, happily married part of a power couple and business owner that lived in Encino Hills all zen, in touch with his emotions, supposedly…had a thing for his dad?

No fucking way.

Robby did not buy it.

It was bullshit.

His dad could be gay, he didn't care, even if that hurt, but Mr. LaRusso and his dad?

No.

Mr. LaRusso hated his dad's guts, and frequently as a ripple effect because he happened to be his dad's kid, Robby too.

He might accept from the universe that his dad would be happy if he got in touch with his emotions and found himself sooner, earlier. Sure. That was fine. But he would not under any circumstances understand or accept that it was with Daniel fucking LaRusso.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Robby didn't know how to handle school.

Daniel had run up to him to talk to him and he knew he was being cold and distant and that it didn't make sense to Daniel.

Sure Daniel knew that Robby knew, but the reasoning for being cold… wasn't what Daniel thought it was.

It wasn't that Robby cared particularly *who* Daniel chose to have a relationship with. Except that it was his fucking father.

Who wasn't his father yet.

And that's where things got messy.

"I just need some time," Robby said softly.

He had so much time.

Too much time.

And the issue was he just couldn't connect the Mr. LaRusso he knew with this Daniel. The Mr. LaRusso of the future who had made it his mission to 'save' everyone from his father, to 'save' the whole damn Valley from his father. And yet this Daniel had very enthusiastically been making out with his dad.

Maybe it was something wrong with their blood. Both his parents. That they always picked people no good for them. Because Robby was so sure that Daniel was in a similar boat to his mother, that he also hated Robby's dad's guts.

With a fiery passion.

So for the moment he was avoiding them.

All of them.

Until the cobras cornered him after school. If he hadn't been getting along with them so well the entire time then it would've been

intimidating.

“Hey, you okay man?” Dutch asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve been distant,” Tommy said.

“I’ve just been thinking.”

“We *know*,” Bobby said.

And there was something about how he said it that Robby knew that they knew.

“And you don’t care?”

“Why would we?”

Because it was the 80s. Because they were his dad’s best friends. Because they hated Daniel—but they didn’t.

“Isn’t it…sudden?”

Dutch burst out laughing.

“Sudden? Are you blind?”

“Dutch not everyone is hyper aware of this stuff,” Bobby said with an eye roll.

“They’ve been dating almost since summer,” Jimmy said softly, gently, like he was trying not to spook Robby.

“What?” Robby said, his voice higher than he meant.

“You were with them most of the time, you didn’t realize you were a third wheel huh?” Tommy asked with a grin.

“They were a little obvious but maybe it’s because we’ve known Johnny for so long,” Bobby said. “I mean they ran off during the Halloween party and came back with their make up all smeared. If Johnny wasn’t so smitten he would’ve noticed and fixed it. It’s actually really sweet how smitten he is, it's nice after how his heart broke after Ali.”

“You were at his house a lot, what were you doing?” Jimmy asked.

“Hanging out with his mom.”

“Listen,” Dutch said, arm throwing around him. “It seems to be shocking, but the thing is, we’re just checking if you’ve got a big issue with it, and if that means **we’re *all*** going to have an issue.”

“I don’t care if they’re gay,” Robby said.

“So what’s the issue?”

“I just don’t think they’re good together,” Robby said.

“What do you have a thing for Johnny?”

“What? No! That would be wrong on so many levels.”

“Hey man what’s wrong with Johnny he’s a great guy.”

“I’m pretty sure on a level we’re related okay?” Robby said.

“Then what you like Daniel?”

“No. I just…I’m just worried okay?”

“Oh, because of Sid?” Jimmy asked.

Not quite, but sure.

“Uh yes,” Robby said.

“Yeah they haven’t been the most careful, but they’re happy. So the best we can just do is not say anything.”

“I won’t.”

“Wait so you think you’re related?”

“Like on his dad’s side?”

“Maybe but I’m not sure so don’t say anything okay?” Robby said.

“Oh man we wouldn’t. His dad’s a sore spot. So if you do ever tell him be very careful about it.”

“I know," Robby said.

“Now you hanging out with his mom all the time makes sense.”

“Okay, sorry we just wanted to check, we noticed you avoiding everyone this week, but hey, if you’re cool, then just take your time and we’ll keep them from checking in too much.”

“Thanks,” Robby said.

“Of course. And we’ll let you know when we’re still doing stuff and you can come if you want and if not no worries, no pressure.”

“Thanks.”

They left and he felt so alone in the world.

He didn’t want to go to class, so he went to his locker, grabbed his stuff and left, boarding to the shop.

“Hey man, isn’t it a school day?” Zak asked.

“Yeah,” Robby said.

“One of those. I get that. Well do you want to make a board?”

“Yes.”

Robby followed Zak to the back of the shop where he was handed a pair of safety goggles and a pair of gloves.

“I generally have decks and tape and everything so skaters come in and buy those and build their own, but rather than outsource the decks, I make those myself and let a few people come in and do their own. Same for the surfboards. Some people really prefer that. The ability to make their own is so important to them, because it becomes a part of themselves. But we'll start off small have you assist at first.”

Robby had repaired his own boards. He’d saved up a few times to make adjustments, but he’d never made a deck from scratch and he was surprised how much work it was, dealing with heat, treating the wood, making changes.

Robby helped Zak with several decks in different steps of the process until he held a deck, a completed one, in his hands.

It was a lot of work and he was sweaty by the end but it reminded him of kata, of doing all that work with Mr. LaRusso and he felt calmer, relaxed when he was done, when he sunk onto a bean bag chair in the backroom after and Zak handed him an iced tea.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t seem like a kid who skips school that much and you don’t give up. I’ve watched you skate.”

“I just needed some space and time.”

“Drama?”

“It shouldn’t be, but I guess. And that’s what makes me feel like a dick. From everyone’s point of view it has nothing to do with me. But it has so much to do with me. I mean the entire universe is telling me that my place in it means nothing.”

“Heavy.”

Robby sighed sinking deeper into the beanbag.

“And what sucks is I’m being literal.”

Zak grabbed a beanbag and dragged it over, flopping down onto it, and then leaned toward Robby. “Isn’t that a relief?”

“A relief?” Robby asked.

“Isn’t that relaxing to not have the eyes of the universe on you? To not be important? So much of the stories we watch and read are about the main people in the event, main characters. They’re the ones who have all the luck or none of the luck, they’re the ones fighting through their heroes journey. But isn’t it nicer to be on the side, just living your life?”

“What life?”

“Whatever you want it to be.”

“But—”

“What’s stopping you from doing anything you want?”

“Because I’ll just be trapped redoing everything over and over again until I get it right.”

“So do something different, learn what you want. Master something. If the universe isn’t paying any attention to you, why pay attention to it?

You're a teenager, be selfish. What do *you* want?"

Robby stared at his iced tea, the weird neon color of the glass, almost a tiki cup, and he took a sip, the sweet taste of the tea, the slight taste of lemon and he sighed.

"Just to live."

"And what does living mean to you huh? Are you living or are you just surviving?"

Was he?

Had he been?

What was he in such a rush to get home for? To fix the time loop for? He didn't even know if he *could* get home. Freddy had conveniently left those details out.

But what was his life?

A pawn in a karate war he wanted nothing to do with?

Reviled because when he got kicked out he went to the only place that let him lay his head? So he took some lessons, so what? He left when it got bad.

Who truly cared if he kept switching teams?

It wasn't a real war.

It was just high school karate.

And— and he'd go back to what? Not knowing where he was sleeping? Where the roof over his head was insubstantial? To Kenny hating his guts? To watching Kenny get meaner and meaner and knowing that was his fault and how the hell was he going to ever face Shawn again?

He'd been tasked with that one small thing, be there for Kenny while Shawn was in juvie. And he'd fucked that up.

No matter how small the task was he always fucked it up, no wonder the universe didn't want him.

It felt like no one did.

“I just want a place where I belong. I want to skate. I want to have a place to sleep without having to worry it’ll be gone, or that someone will forget to pay the bills. I want my own room, I want not have to worry where I’m going to have to get my next meal or how. I want to go to school and not be some leper. I want to not have to watch my back or worry all the fucking time. I just want to be. I don’t want it to always be just surviving. And then…I just…I want my dad. I miss him and I never see him and I’m not number 1 for him and I get that but… it’s still unfair, that no matter what I’m never—he never ***sees*** me. I don’t need to win anything big, just something small, and it could just be that I’m seen.”

“So a lot of that is survival,” Zak said. “So how about this, no matter what, if you feel like you don’t have a place to lay your head you come here. I’ve got food in the fridge and as long as it’s not my last slice of haupia pie, we’re good.”

“But you might not always remember me,” Robby said.

Zak frowned tilting his head thoughtfully.

“How about this, here’s a word that not a lot of people here know but *I’ll know*, no matter what happens, no matter how we change and differ. So tell me *o’hana*. Okay? It means family but it’s not just you know, blood. It’s Hawaiian, not a lot of people know the word but I’ll get it.”

“Thanks,” Robby said nearly wanting to say everyone knew what that word meant.

“Repeat it back.”

“O’hana means family—” Robby said cutting himself off before he finished the line.

“Correct. So what else is bugging you?” He asked sinking back into his beanbag.

How the hell did he explain that?

That he caught his dad with a guy? A guy he hates?

He was in the past.

He was in a loop.

It didn't make sense.

"My dad…I don't live with him, I haven't ever really, and he and my mom weren't together much," Robby said staring at the ice cubes in his drink trying to be careful. "They were both kind of a wreck. But my dad also had this like sports thing he did a long time ago that he was good at, a competition that was like one on one you know? And he won, a lot, but then he lost his girlfriend one year and then the competition and that guy he lost both to became like his enemy, his rival that he hated most of his life.

"And I just saw…I just *found* this old box of stuff and there was like… uh…the photos you take that come out of the camera immediately?"

"A Polaroid?" Zak said.

"Yeah…of my dad and that rival…uh super intimate. I want to bleach my eyes and my brain."

"Oh, wow— Does it really affect anything though?"

"Well he's so damn miserable and he looked…I dunno happy? So he would've been happier if I didn't exist, if he and this guy ended up together and—"

"But that's not what happened Robby, you exist. And sure maybe he might regret not going for it, maybe that's why your parents didn't work out, but what does that really have to do with you? Your parents are people, and they can make mistakes and fail at their loves and romances and it has got nothing to do with you. That's on them. Not you. Their choices, the things they failed to achieve are not your fault. You exist and that's a good thing."

"It feels like the universe is saying it's not though."

"But you're here. In this vast universe, you exist by some wonderful chance. You truly should do what you want, enjoy the moments you can, rather than worry about your father or others. You're a good kid, but you could use some time to be selfish."

Robby sighed looking at his glass and the ice melting.

Maybe Zak was right. Maybe none of this mattered. If he was trapped in time and in the past, then why not do what he wanted? At least for a bit.

He had been after all, but sparingly.

Maybe he'd do more reading. Read all the books he could get his hands on at the school library. Maybe he'd eat more, all the food he couldn't afford to eat back home because he *could* afford it. Maybe he'd just start doing what he wanted.

He could be selfish.

"Will you keep teaching me how to make boards?"

"Sure! You ready to jump back in?"

"Let's not waste time."

"Glad to hear it," Zak grinned getting up and holding out a hand to Robby, clapping him on the back before they returned to the boards.

Chapter End Notes

> Haupia pie recipe: https://www.hawaiimagazine.com/recipe-how-to-make-hawaii-chocolate-haupia-pie/

Chapter 11

Robby moved through the days in a blur. He did what he wanted. He read in school as much as he could, he left Daniel and Johnny to their relationship and learned as much as he could from Zak and then one morning when he woke up there was bright sunlight in his face and he was standing up in the courtyard and he heard the gate swing open and as Daniel stepped through he realized it'd all restarted.

The previous ones were easy to stomach.

Those restarts all so long ago.

They'd maybe lasted a week or two.

But this time, watching Daniel step through that gate again made his blood boil.

He couldn't look at him.

He couldn't do this again. He couldn't watch this guy either fight his dad or fall in love with his dad.

He hated everything in a moment of burning rage.

He hated that he'd gotten to spend time with his grandmother, with his father, that he'd had such a nice time only to learn he wasn't wanted in the larger scheme of things.

So he welcomed Daniel and once Freddy was helping Daniel carry his stuff up to his apartment he left, slipped out the gate to go to the parking lot where his father was.

He was going to do something he promised himself he was never going to do.

He sat and let his leg bounce nervously, looking upset, because he *was* upset, and he watched his dad do his card tricks to cheer him up and he did his own flourishes back.

Then he made a change.

"Hey you know anywhere I could learn karate?"

Johnny perked up with a grin. "Oh yeah, I do!"

And Robby followed him, let Johnny lead him down the streets, to the dojo he'd only been to once with Daniel, avoiding it like the plague every other time.

But if nothing mattered, if everything fell apart all the time, restarting over and over again, then why not meet Kreese?

Why not learn Cobra Kai from the source, right back when it had begun?

"Sensei Kreese?" Johnny called as they entered the dojo.

There weren't any students and it was dark except for a light on in the back office. Johnny took off his shoes and put them away and Robby followed suit.

"Lawrence is that you? What are you doing here? You know today we're closed so I can do all the paperwork right?"

"Well it's got to do with paperwork."

"Yeah?"

Robby stepped into the office and it was so similar to how Kreese had it in the future, complete with the same damn cigars and the photos of him from his military days.

"Who's this Mr. Lawrence?"

"Robby Keene," Johnny said. "He said he was interested in learning karate."

Robby cringed, maybe he shouldn't have given his full actual name.

But then again, what did it matter?

It wasn't like this would be the one to go through and Kreese would hunt him down later.

Nothing really mattered.

"Mr. Lawrence you know we're in the middle of training, trying to decide who will join us for the All-Valley. I've stopped taking beginners…beginner classes don't start until January, *after* the All-Valley is over."

"At least let him try out."

“And with who, you?”

“Well why not?”

“And if you get hurt? You’re my ***ace*** Lawrence. I can’t lose my ace.”

Nothing mattered.

He was so pissed at everything.

Why not go big?

“What if I sparred against you?” Robby said looking at Kreese.

Kreese blinked, then laughed. “Okay okay I like this kid’s backbone. We’ll do what I do with all prospective students. Let me just go change real quick into a gi.”

Robby left the office and walked out with Johnny, looking over the photos, the awards of all the students Kreese had taught over the years, photos of Johnny, of his father when he started, a tiny string bean that Robby had never seen photos of before.

He wished he’d seen photos from before.

There wasn’t much of his father around.

Sid hadn’t kept anything and Johnny didn’t keep anything.

Well that wasn’t true. He’d kept every single piece of artwork Robby had ever made him in that spare room.

But there wasn’t much of himself in that damn apartment.

No old photos like this. He wondered what had happened to them in the future.

Had Kreese kept them? Had he thrown them out?

Had someone else salvaged them?

Or if they were there and no one had bothered to show them to Robby.

“Do you need any advice or anything?” Johnny asked and he looked a little nervous.

Robby *knew* Kreese.

He knew how he taught.

This would be fine. He just wanted something to do because he sure as hell did want to look at the guy he'd seen tonguing his dad again.

"No, I've taken some karate before."

Kreese walked out in his black sleeveless gi. The same one the guy always seemed to have on and Kreese had an almost bored look on his face.

"So the deal is kid, you strike, you try to strike and if you get a hit, or you impress me enough then we'll talk. You fail you go home and try again in January. Got it?"

"Got it."

Robby stood in front of him, bowed, and Kreese looked amused, bowing back, then hooked his thumbs through his gi and waited.

Robby went for a straightforward attack, he knew Kreese would find it too easy and predictable, so as soon as Kreese shifted out of the way Robby pivoted on his back foot for a kick, a high kick.

In normal circumstances Robby would've reined it in.

In a normal world Robby would've never gone full throttle on an old man.

He *wasn't* old. Not the same grandfatherly old he was in Robby's time.

And it was Kreese.

Kreese showed no mercy.

Except when he'd let Robby crash in the dojo.

Except when he'd brought Robby food.

Except when he'd showed up to Juvie.

So in the last minute he'd pulled his strength because he couldn't knock the old man out.

Even though he **wanted** to.

And Kreese avoided it, a look of surprise on his face for merely a beat, a mere moment before it turned into a grin.

Robby moved back.

“You weren’t joking! That was amazing Robby!” Johnny said from where he stood on the sidelines. “You’re really fast! And that feint!”

“Lawrence!”

“Yes sensei!”

“Where’d you find this kid?”

“Uh, just around. We were hanging out earlier. He said he was new to town.”

“Well, kid, that was impressive. So we’re going to skip the usual song and dance and instead Johnny will bring you for classes on Monday you got that?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hey Lawrence, grab the kid a jacket huh? Introduce him to the team.”

“Of course sensei!” Johnny said.

Johnny moved quickly to obey, rushing into the back and coming back with a jacket, an emerald green cobra kai jacket.

“Let’s go, I’ll introduce you to the guys,” Johnny said.

Robby followed him, holding the jacket in surprise.

He knew his dad had one. A red one.

Hell he’d seen the cobras wearing them around.

He’d seen his dad give the damn thing to Miguel.

But to have one, his own— it was weird how much it meant.

They took a bus, and then walked for quite a bit until they arrived at Bobby’s house. It was too warm out to wear the jacket and Robby was relieved he was meeting Bobby first.

Johnny knocked and then went right in, calling as he did so, “Hello! How are all the Brown’s today? Is there a Bobert around here? I want to introduce him to a new friend.”

“The dweeb is upstairs,” a girl said from where she sat on the couch, reading a book. “What is with you and collecting them, huh? You found yourself another little snake?”

“This is Robby, Robby this is the delightful Miss Pamela waiting out the hours till summer vacation is over and she can go back out to Berkley.”

She rolled her eyes and Johnny walked past her and Robby followed him up the stairs to a room where music was playing loud enough to seep out but not loud enough to bother the rest of the house.

Johnny knocked then pushed the door open, popping his head in.

“Want to meet someone new?”

“Is it a girl?”

“No.”

He heard Bobby sigh, deeply and the door opened the rest of the way and Bobby looked at Robby, spotted the green jacket in his hands and then looked at Johnny in surprise.

“How the hell did that happen?”

“He’s good.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really.”

And then Bobby grabbed Johnny’s hand and pushed up his sleeve, revealing a whole brunch of bruises on his arm.

“Did he do this?”

“Robby? No way man. He sparred with Sensei.”

“No I mean did ***HE*** do this?”

“Bobby I’m *fine*,” Johnny said yanking his hand out of Bobby’s grip and giving him a look, eyes quickly going towards Robby.

A desperate plea to not do this now, not in front of Robby.

And Bobby stood there tense, pissed, and then he sighed, running a hand through his hair, grabbing a few locks in frustration before letting going and rubbing his hands over his shorts, like he was wiping them off before he held out his hand to Robby.

“Bobby nice to meet you.”

“Robby.”

“Oh that’s going to get confusing,” Bobby said with a laugh. “But I like it.”

“Okay so what’s the plan?”

“I thought maybe we could all get together, have a sleepover, welcome Robby to the team you know? Before school starts. That way he’ll already have us on his first day,” Johnny said.

Bobby looked Johnny up and down before sighing again, biting his lip as if to keep himself from saying something.

“Yeah okay. I’ll call the guys and we’ll figure something out. Robby why don’t you make yourself comfortable?” Bobby said waving towards a desk, towards a chair.

Robby sat in the chair looking around Bobby’s room, the music posters on the wall, the books on his desk, a fish living in an aquarium he had set up and Robby leaned forward watching it as it moved around, before suddenly a school of fish shot out and past it from behind a haunted house decoration.

They were whispering, or trying to, with the music it might’ve worked to obscure what they were saying, but it just wasn’t loud enough.

“Did you walk here? What happened? Did Sid hit you again?”

“I don’t want to talk about it Bobby, let’s just call the guys and—”

“Johnny this can’t keep happening. You need to tell someone—”

“It’s just one more year and then I’m out, so who cares?”

“What if he *breaks* something? How will you compete huh? You’ve been playing it off as if it’s karate to not worry your mom but if he breaks something? What will you say then huh? That it happened in

karate? Your mom will pull you out so fast. And then you'll be stuck with him."

"He wasn't as bad last year," Johnny said softly.

"That doesn't matter. The point is we gotta tell someone Johnny you can't just keep being a punching bag."

"But if it keeps him from hitting my mom—"

"Has he ever threatened her?"

"No but he yells, they yell all the time— Bobby enough of this I'm not doing it, just invite the guys and we'll have a sleepover and introduce Robby to everyone and just drop it okay?"

"I just don't want to see you get hurt. I don't like it at all."

"Bobby, I'm not a little kid anymore, none of us are. Let's just have some fun huh?"

Bobby sighed but picked up his phone and made some calls.

Chapter 12

The cobras dropped whatever they were doing and came fast. Bobby's cozy room was suddenly cramped.

Robby knew them thanks to the last loop, but it was interesting to be introduced on his own, as a cobra, without just a new person with Daniel.

It felt like a bright spotlight had shined on him and it was odd, to have a bunch of people so excited to meet him. His dad and his friends and for a moment he felt cool.

Really cool.

He felt like he was a part of something in a way he hadn't ever really felt in karate. He'd always been a pawn. Or someone had always *tried* to make him a pawn.

Mr. LaRusso had used him because his dad had started Cobra Kai up again and he'd used Mr. LaRusso because his dad had picked some random kid instead of him.

And then Kreese wanted him to be Cobra Kai because he was Johnny's son, and Silver had thought he could be molded and used to keep Kreese on his side or against Kreese, and everyone thought he could be used as bait and…well now he was.

But now, even though he was Johnny Lawrence's son, he also wasn't.

He was new. He was himself.

He could be himself and learn karate and people were paying attention to him because of his own merits.

And there was something nice about watching *Rocky* with his dad and his friends. It was nice to just be and Robby didn't care about anything.

He was going to be selfish, like Zak had said.

He was going to do what he wanted.

And right now that was spending his night sitting on Bobby's floor eating popcorn and pizza, drinking soda and spending time with his

dad.

Not as Robby Keene son of Johnny Lawrence, but just Robby the new cobra.

In the morning the Brown's made breakfast and seemed to delight that they were all there, welcoming Robby warmly to the group and to town, not seeming concerned that he lived in Reseda or that he was living with the Fernandez's…maybe, he hadn't gone in to introduce himself yet, he'd worry about that later though.

They had waffles and bacon and eggs and four different kinds of juice and chocolate milk and he watched as his dad filled up his plate, decorating his waffle with fruit and pouring himself a glass of chocolate milk.

Maybe they were alike in ways his dad just never mentioned, but had noticed.

And was that fair?

For his dad to not tell him all the things they shared? All the proclivities?

Or was it because his dad hated himself so much that he didn't want Robby to know all those echos of himself he noticed and picked up on, and he just hid them further and deeper in himself so no one would realize Robby was so much like his old man?

It wasn't fair.

He poured himself a glass and sat across from his dad with his waffles.

"So what do we want to do today? Bike?" Jimmy asked.

"Well we have the whole day, we could bike this morning and then do something else."

"There's the beach party."

"But do we *want* to go? I mean that's more you know her thing and why bother today?" Bobby asked. "It's the last day of summer, let's do something more fun."

“Like what?” Johnny asked.

“Well if almost everyone is going to be at the beach it’d be a great time to go to Golf 'n Stuff,” Bobby said. “Plus that’ll be a fun way to welcome Robby.”

That was an option?

Just completely skip the beach altogether?

“That sounds like fun,” Robby said quickly.

“Okay, sure, we can bike the beach this morning then,” Johnny said.

“We’ll rent a bike for you,” Dutch said with a grin to Robby.

“Oh, thank you,” Robby said.

“What do you like to do Robby? Outside of karate?”

“I like to skateboard and I like to read.”

“Another nerd!” Dutch said delighted, arm thrown around Johnny. “You know Johnny likes to read as well! He teaches himself all sorts of stuff.”

“There’s a shop I should take you to,” Johnny said, kicking Dutch under the table. “It’s a nice skateboard place that you might like.”

“That’d be great, I didn’t come here with very much and need a board.”

“I thought I heard a bunch of dweebs. They multiplied,” Pam said as she came in with a frown.

“Isn’t it nice?” Ms. Brown asked. “All of Bobby’s friends.”

“They’re going to eat us out of house and home.”

“Oh nonsense,” Ms. Brown said, smiling at them all. “Who would like another waffle?”

Robby was surprised how quickly everyone’s hands shot up and he laughed.

“Robby dear, would you like another one too?”

“Yes please,” Robby said.

“So polite. Just one moment dear.”

It was nice. So ridiculously nice to just be another kid amongst a few, welcome and not in the way.

It wasn’t charity that he was getting fed.

That he’d gotten to spend the night.

It wasn’t because things had fallen through and his mom and her newest boyfriend had forgotten to pay the bills. It wasn’t because he was fighting with anyone and didn’t want to see them.

It wasn’t surviving and an emergency.

No, he was just there.

Welcome.

Robby got to ride a dirt bike that they rented in the morning and it was nice to have his own. In the previous loop he’d always ridden on the back of someone else’s and for a minute he wondered what the difference was until he passed by a shop and saw his reflection.

He was wearing his emerald green Cobra Kai jacket.

He was a cobra this time.

Part of the group.

Part of the team.

This was his welcoming committee, not a party but a roar by the sea of speed and joyous yelling. It was freeing to be at the beach in the daytime, to kick up sand and not disturb anyone, to run along the water before it got crowded, shooting across the sand and up the dunes, getting more air than he had on his board, feeling weightless, free, like he was flying.

They rode for hours, until they got hungry and then drove down to a boardwalk to get hot dogs and ice cold sodas and they sat, watching the sea.

It was just nice to be a part of the group. No one was buttering him up for anything. Not like Trey and Cruz usually did. They usually always wanted something from him, wanted him to be a part of one of their schemes.

He felt for a minute awash with grief.

Grief that he'd felt when he'd been studying with Mr. LaRusso.

That his life could've been different.

He could've had friends like Demetri and Sam his whole life. He could've had friends that didn't want something from him necessarily. Nothing that would've gotten him into trouble, or pressured him into it.

He could've lived a life where he was wanted.

So he was going to try it. He was going to do what he wanted this time, it was a loop, he didn't care. He was going to be selfish. So when they went to Golf 'n Stuff he played arcade games with his dad for hours, played games with the guys and laughed until his stomach hurt at their nonsense.

They didn't go to the beach.

And part of him, hoped that maybe this time they'd never meet Daniel. And Daniel could have a loop where the cobras didn't bother him and there was no fighting or flirty bickering, because that's what it had been.

He was just so used to them truly fighting, that for them to be bickering instead it'd been a relief. Such a relief that he hadn't realized it was flirting. Though to be fair he hadn't ever seen his dad flirt before.

And he crammed into a Ferris wheel with all the guys, looking out at the view of the LA while Johnny stretched out, not caring that his legs bumped into Dutch and Bobby.

"Tomorrow's the start of a whole new year, a clean slate. I'm going to make it my best year yet. No more ace degenerate, just me. Just doing well in school and graduating and making my mom proud."

"Where's the fun in that?" Tommy asked, amused, throwing an arm round his shoulder.

“It’s maturity Tommy. We’re going to be adults soon.”

“What about karate?” Jimmy asked.

“Oh I’ll still give it my all. I owe sensei that much. But I’m kind of excited for what comes next you know?”

“So you’ve decided what school you’re going to?”

“Honestly no clue,” Johnny said with a soft laugh. “My step dad’s put a stack of his approved universities in my room, so I figure I’ll write my essays for those and then talk to the counselor and see what else is out there. But I think it’d be fun to go on a road trip after we graduate. Just leave the city behind, because who knows what else is out there.”

Robby understood that, that need to get out, to see more of the world. And he knew his dad hadn’t ever left.

“We could go to Vegas.”

“San Fransico?”

“Further than that,” Johnny said with a smile. “We should get out of the state, out of the deserts.

“So what? Seattle? Portland?”

“Anywhere. We could go to Mexico, or Canada. We could head east.”

“So a *big* road trip,” Bobby said.

“Yeah why not? There’s so many parks, so many cities, so many things to see and do and try.”

“Robby you want to come with?” Johnny asked.

“I would,” Robby said, even though for a split second he realized how weird that sounded. They’d *just* met, the day before. And a road trip?

But it was his dad, it was getting out of this city, it was all the things he wanted.

Johnny just grinned though and sighed, pleased, while the guys threw out places they wanted to see, potentials for a road trip.

Robby didn’t care where they went, just wanted to be a part of it.

Excited that he *could* be a part of it. If the loop ever lasted that long.

Robby started school without issues. He saw Daniel in passing, as a neighbor and was friendly without being friends. He wanted to keep this loop separate.

After school he rode in Johnny's Avanti to the Cobra Kai dojo and he did what Kreese asked.

He didn't put a ton of effort in, because he didn't care.

He was there to have fun.

And he was.

The guys, without any enemy to focus on were silly, were just there to learn and they made jokes and were just regular teens, not the scary military nightmares that Mr. LaRusso had always made it sound, how it always *felt* when he studied at Cobra Kai himself.

"Fall in!" Kreese said.

And they fell.

Literally.

Like dominoes onto the mats.

Robby had fallen only because he'd noticed the look in Johnny's eye and the gentle nudge he'd been given.

And the whole dojo echoed with their laughter.

And Kreese stood there sour faced, but it wasn't as harsh as it had been when Robby had been at the dojo back in his own time.

No he looked…like it was a mask. Like he was trying desperately to hide his own amusement, his own laughter.

That danger Robby always felt in Kreese's dojo wasn't there.

Not in that moment.

And looking at his father's smiling face, the faces of his friends and the others in the dojo, Robby realized this, moments like this, were

what made this a home to his father. A safe space for him to just be a teen…unlike at home.

And Robby got it. Understood it all.

There was something about studying karate without any karate war or enemy to have to defend against or fight against.

He hadn't enjoyed karate this much in a long time.

It seemed to Robby that the different loops had similarities. They followed the same beats of leading towards Halloween, towards the All-Valley.

School was pretty much always exactly the same. The same lectures, the same homework, the same tests.

But there were differences.

Like Freddy, if he couldn't ever find Johnny the first time then he had no clue where Johnny was or what he was doing at the start of it.

But if Robby followed Johnny with Daniel then he got to explore the city, got to play tourist in a pretty sweet car.

With the guys Robby found himself, to his surprise, doing a lot of studying.

He wasn't at the mansion as much as he wished, unlike with Daniel, because the guys seemed to avoid going there, seemed to avoid letting Johnny go there when they could.

So instead it was school, karate, studying, and then maybe some fun on Friday nights or the weekends, like the movies or renting VHS's or doing something else around the karate lessons scheduled on the weekends.

They played soccer sometimes, they went to a few parties, but most of the time, to Robby's surprise, they were all surprisingly studious. Busily writing essays to colleges and researching what else they needed to do to get to where they wanted. Cramming for tests.

Robby was pretty sure he knew his math, science, and history textbooks and the upcoming tests and papers by heart by this point thanks to so many early on loops.

So instead he read.

And that was nice, to sit on one of the guy's floors in their bedroom while they studied for different subjects and just read.

He was working his way through the classics at school. Shakespeare, Orwell, Tolstoy, Morrison, Salinger, Steinbeck, Austen, Shelly, Dickens, Twain, Poe, and everything else.

It also meant he didn't have a ton of cash in his pocket since he hadn't tried to get a job at the surf and board shop with Zak yet.

Johnny had surprised him with a board, telling him he knew a place that had extras for people and Robby was surprised to see that the board Johnny had picked out from Zak's from the free pile was the exact one he'd picked out in the last loop.

It was odd.

But also comforting.

Just like it was to read and not worry about anything else beyond writing out essays about whatever he was reading for English class.

After so much time fighting to be able to read *Lord of the Flies* in juvie, it was nice to not have to worry.

He was working his way through *The Great Gatsby* when he realized, laying on the shag carpet of Jimmy's bedroom that he hadn't seen his dad in a minute.

He just sort of assumed his dad would be there, because he usually was.

"Hey, where's Johnny?" Robby asked when he finished the chapter he was on.

"Oh he's got a project due that he had to go to his partner's house to get done."

"The science project?" Dutch asked.

"Yeah."

"He's in Reseda then," Dutch said. "We're doing science experiments. I've gotta go work on mine with Susie tomorrow."

Reseda was bigger than the apartment complex he lived in with Freddy and his family.

Robby knew that, and he reminded himself of that, forcing himself to open his book again.

It wasn't Daniel.

Not in this loop.

They hadn't even met.

There'd been no beach. No introduction.

So he returned to his book, trying to push away the sinking feeling that the nice time with his dad, and *just* his dad and friends was coming to an end.

Chapter 13

Barbara threw a party. Robby hadn't been to it yet, hadn't been interested in it. But the cobras were close friends with Ali's best friends despite Ali and Johnny's break up. And now that he was a cobra he was expected to attend the party as well.

He dressed nicely, jeans and a neon bright polo and he talked with Barbara, with Susan, with Ali.

And he waited for his friends.

He waited for his dad.

And then he spotted him, that blonde head leaning down to hear someone talk despite the music, leaning against the wall, leaning over the person and Robby decided he didn't want to look.

So he found Dutch and played a game of beer pong, swapping out the beer for soda. Relieved when Dutch didn't push him to put beer in the cups. Relieved that even though the guy was there for a wild and fun time, he didn't care if Robby stayed sober.

He'd seen what various substances did to his parents. He didn't want to fall down that same rabbit hole.

And it was fun, to toss a ball and watch it splash into a cup and Dutch groan and scoop it up, gulping down his beer.

"You're too damn precise, almost as precise as Johnny you know that? I'd think the two of you were siblings if I didn't know better Keene."

"Why's that?"

"You've got so many of the same mannerisms. Your smart, calculating, hell if Johnny wasn't a leader I know you'd step up to the plate. It's honestly like you're on vacation, enjoying a peaceful ride and it's nice man, real nice. Very zen or some shit. The rest of us are busting our asses and you're reading Keats, for *fun*. Johnny does that shit too. We did a karate camp a few years back and you know what Johnny brought with him? His walkman of course, but also fucking *Ulysses*. You ever see *Ulysses*?"

"No."

“James Joyce. I tried to read part of it and it didn’t make any fucking sense. And Johnny though was so fucking into it. I mean he got **me** interested because the damn thing was banned and no one wanted to publish it because it was somewhat pornographic or some shit, but Johnny was reading the damn thing for fun, not for the porn, but for the style, and it required a readers guide. Outside of Shakespeare, what book requires a fucking readers guide? *Ulysses* for some fucking reason. He was talking about how every different chapter was a different parody of a different style and woven in with all this history and cultural references of another place and country…Dublin I think? and I was like we’re training for karate. We’ve got some tournaments coming up, and the way you’re chilling to cool down after practice and working out is homework? You two are two peas in a pod.”

Dutch missed his ball because Bobby threw an arm around him.

“I should get a redo, that wasn’t fair!”

“Okay,” Robby said throwing the ball back.

“What are you guys up to? Getting sloshed?”

“Talking about how similar Robby is to Johnny.”

“And clearly you’re losing,” Bobby said with a grin.

“Shut up.”

“But he is right, it’s little mannerisms you know? You like a lot of the same foods and music. I’d think you were brothers you know?”

“Right?” Dutch asked throwing the ball and it splashed into the soda and Robby picked it up, fishing out the ping pong, tossing it without looking and drinking down the cola.

He heard the splash.

“Did you see that? That little fucker!” Dutch howled.

It wasn’t anger.

Not really.

He sounded impressed. And based off of Bobby’s whistle, it seemed like they both were.

“Damn, that was cool as hell Robby,” Bobby said. “Drink up Dutch.”

“Yeah yeah I know, shut up. I wish this wasn’t warm as fuck. Cold beer and this would be better.”

“Didn’t you pick the beer you poured in?” Robby asked.

“Hey, I don’t want anything out of you wise guy. I wasn’t expecting to have to drink all of these you little fucker,” Dutch said pointing at him with a frown before sighing and downing the rest of his drink.

He knew Dutch well enough that it was all said with a level of fondness and no ire. Something he never would've known, a few loops back.

They played a little longer, until Dutch lost the last one and Bobby helped him find a couch to crash on and Robby went to go get him some water and food.

And then he went exploring. It was his first time in Barbara’s house. Another mansion in the Hills and he knew this wasn’t a loop that would go far. So he was note taking.

Where was everyone?

What were they doing?

Ali was talking to Susan, curled up next to each other sharing a pool chair outside. It was barely warm enough to still swim but there were plenty of kids in the pool.

Barbara was dancing with a guy Robby recognized but didn’t actually know before she spotted Jimmy and she grinned, switching to dance with the cobra.

Tommy was hanging out with the soccer team playing pool.

There were various couples in some of the other rooms, making out. There was a game of cards that seemed to be a game of strip poker happening in another room.

Some kids were high and others were sitting around smoking and watching TV, or a movie, Robby couldn’t tell, he didn’t recognize it.

Robby opened the door to another room and it was just a closet. Heavy coats, fur coats carefully wrapped up in dry cleaner plastic, hats galore. But then he noticed hiding on the other side of the coat rack were two people who startled had thrown themselves away from

each other as soon as he opened the door.

Robby shut the door fast.

He walked quickly out of the house and found a quiet spot in the garden not currently full of teens and buried his head in his hands.

How?

They hadn't even really met!

Why the fuck was his dad in a closet making out with Mr. LaRusso?

Why was it always Daniel?

Why couldn't his dad pick someone else? Why couldn't he be with Barbara or—or— Bobby was nice to him, or one of his cobras.

Why the hell was it Daniel?

Mr. LaRusso hated his guts in the future. Talked down to him.

And that was who he picked?

The guy who belittled him in the future?

Who raised his rent?

Who told the cops where Robby was so he'd get sent to Juvie when he just wanted to talk to his mom?

Who gave him a home and then took it away as soon as he decided he didn't trust Robby because Robby was his father's son?

Anyone else was okay.

But not Mr. LaRusso.

Chapter 14

The time loop restarted a few weeks later.

Robby had stopped paying much attention to anything falling into a rut of despair.

So he tried his hardest to keep Daniel and Johnny apart.

He kept Johnny from seeing Daniel at the beach but that meant they met at school.

So he tried to get switched to the class that made them science partners and he got in the middle, and while that stopped them from making out in Barbara's hallway closet, Robby then found them making out at the Halloween dance, Johnny a skeleton and Daniel a ghost.

So he kept Johnny busy with games during the Halloween dance.

And then he found Johnny and Daniel while he was hiking, making out in the woods.

He wanted to scream.

No matter what he did to keep them apart, somehow they always found each other and he always stumbled upon them like a demented jack in the box, making out in some random corner.

So Robby tried to get his dad to meet other people.

He tried to repair Johnny's relationship with Ali and they became great friends, but didn't end up together and instead Ali became a force blocking Robby from blocking Daniel and Johnny.

He tried to see if any of the cobras had even an inkling of a thing for his dad and that lead to a very weird drunken sleepover that he needed to scrub from his brain.

He tried to introduce his dad to guys from other schools.

Girls from other schools.

And without fail, he found Daniel LaRusso sticking his fucking tongue down his dad's throat.

Behind the bleachers at an away game for a soccer event that Daniel was playing in.

At the prom in Johnny's car, with his crown crooked.

In the library during finals behind all the reference books.

At the beach under the board walk where Mr. LaRusso had defended Robby so many years in the future but what felt like so long ago.

It was like every time loop where he tried to separated them just made it worse and it just pissed Robby off, more and more that no matter how he changed things, no matter what he did he couldn't keep them apart.

And it pissed him off so badly that he threw himself deeper into Cobra Kai.

He did everything Kreese told him.

He struck first.

He fought hard.

He showed no mercy.

He lost himself in it.

Every single loop.

Cursing Daniel LaRusso and everything he'd ever done.

That Robby had trusted him. Had thought he'd found himself a mentor, a teacher, only to get thrown away. Only to not be told that his dad had a room for him. A *real* room. With a bed and that it was Robby's. Because he couldn't live with his dad because it was like Daniel LaRusso thought his father was evil incarnate.

And why give him his own room with a real bed when he could sleep in a cot in a dojo?

Because Mr. LaRusso was better than his dad, more stable.

And he'd dared believe it.

But what bullshit was that since every time he found them the bastard was touching his dad?

His blood boiled.

He was pissed at his dad, for letting himself get pushed around. Not standing up to Mr. LaRusso. For not fighting for him.

No he just accepted it, every awful thing ever said about him by anyone.

Almost any time.

But if his dad had fought for him he would've had a home.

He would've had his own room. And maybe—maybe having Robby there would've snapped his dad out of it earlier. Maybe his dad would've changed. For him.

Maybe he wouldn't have let himself continue to be a punching bag.

Maybe they both could've had a happier time.

Sure they'd have been poor, but they'd have been together.

And maybe his mom would've gotten help earlier.

And maybe he would've befriended Miguel as neighbors.

Maybe the two of them could've learned karate from his dad together.

Maybe he could've talked his dad into giving cobra kai the name eagle fang or literally anything else and then it never would've been on Daniel LaRusso's radar, or Kreese's or Silver's.

Then no one would've gotten their claws in Kenny.

Miguel never would've gotten hurt.

Maybe things would've been better.

Maybe he wasn't needed.

Freddy tried to talk to him. A few times. A look of concern on his face as Robby trudged forward. It felt like he was walking through muck. He understood he should do what he wanted. But every time he got in a groove things fell apart. Even when he was doing what he wanted.

He'd read all the books he wanted and even some he didn't. He'd

mastered moves he'd been struggling with. He knew all the tests by heart and all the lectures too.

He spent hours with his grandmother, bonding with her only to start over again as strangers.

The problem was he didn't see where he fit in.

He didn't belong in the past.

He didn't belong in the 80s. And every time he found Daniel and Johnny making out somewhere or holding hands he realized how little he belonged anywhere.

What was there in the future for him?

He'd known what it was like to be welcome.

He'd known what it was like to just be himself.

And then it all came crashing down and every time he saw his dad looking so damn happy and at peace with his hand on Daniel.

The universe clearly was telling him that they were meant to be together.

But if they were meant to be together then he wasn't meant to be.

So when the gate swung open again.

And he saw Daniel come through again.

He had enough.

And he ran.

He ran until he heard tires screech and he hoped for nothing. Blissful nothing.

Chapter 15

Robby sat down at the diner across from Freddy, feeling drained and exhausted. His body felt bruised.

For the last few loops he'd been avoiding Freddy. Trying to find ways to not feel anything but feeling so brutally awful every time.

He'd been staying with Zak. Showing up at night when he needed sleep or food. Zak always stared at him with a level of suspicion until Robby told him *o'hana* and then the guys face changed, like he realized Robby needed help.

He felt awful so he could only assume how he looked. But Zak always made up the couch for him, put food out for him and said if he needed anything to let him know.

But Freddy had been faster this time, had grabbed him right as the gate opened and dragged him to the diner.

He was frowning.

"I told you not to do it. How many times did you do it?"

Robby shrugged.

"You feel like shit because you shouldn't do it. It restarts when you do."

"I'm just sick of this."

"I know."

"Every time things seem to be going well we go back to the beginning. I've stopped them from fighting on the beach like a dozen different times. I've stopped them from beating the shit out of each other countless other times. What the hell does the world want from me? To not exist? Is that it? Because they seem like they'd be happier—"

Robby didn't finish it.

He wondered if Freddy knew. If he'd known and still not warned him that his dad and Mr. LaRusso seemed to keep falling into…whatever it was.

“Did you ever wonder *why* I picked you?” Freddy asked. “And not Sam or Miguel or one of the other kids?”

“Because I’m the one they care about the least so if I go missing or if I disappear—”

“Because for every longer time loop I went down, any time things happened in a way where you wouldn’t be born…if Shannon got into a car accident and lost you, if your parents never met, if you died young, it was an instant return back here. It took me a while to realize it. But there are load bearing events that *must* happen. Daniel must meet and become close friends with Mr. Miyagi. That’s one of the reasons you keep failing. If Daniel doesn’t become friends with Mr. Miyagi and if Mr. Miyagi doesn’t become like a father to him, it’s game over. You got closer the one time he wore that shower curtain for Halloween, but that urgency to become close wasn’t there. If Johnny lives in bliss, wins the damn karate tournament and goes on to the Seikai Taikai—”

“The what?”

“It’s a bigger All Valley,” Freddy said waving off the question. “If he goes to that and doesn’t have his falling out or realization that Kreese is fucked up, then it’s game over. Like I followed him all the way through winning the damn thing and I thought well shit this is the perfect one. He doesn’t get badly hurt, he wins the fucking world championship, Silver doesn’t get his claws in Daniel, we’re golden, and then bam right back at the beginning. And I have a hypothesis.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know what their deal is but their lives are intertwined,” Freddy said crossing his fingers in front of him and Robby frowned. “Daniel and your dad. If they’re too happy out in the world on their own then they don’t meet again in the future bam we’re right back here. And the building blocks seem to need that. If they’re kept apart entirely it’s game over. If they don’t gain or break away from their father figures it’s game over. And if they go their separate ways and never meet again, game over. And if you don’t exist, game over.”

Robby frowned looking down at his coffee, the steam wafting off of it.

“Okay, I think I know what to do,” Robby said putting some coins on the table and getting up.

“What are you going to do?” Freddy said.

“My best!”

Robby hurried to the parking lot he knew his dad was hanging out in, enjoying the magic tricks his dad was willing to show him to cheer him up. He went to the skate shop, impressed Zak, taught his dad to board and then took his dad back to Daniel’s for their poker night.

That seemed to be the best route.

He’d just have to see what happened, if he did the best of the best route, added Mr. Miyagi then he’d just have to ignore Daniel and Johnny’s flirting.

Even if this all failed, he'd at least know more.

He spent his time keeping an eye on Mr. Miyagi and his whereabouts so in the next one he could ensure Daniel and Mr. Miyagi crossed paths.

It took three tries, but the awful buzzing in his bones, the feeling that he’d been hit by a truck started to wear off.

It was harder than he thought.

Mr. Miyagi did not want to spend his time with teenagers and without the strife just didn’t get drawn in.

No matter what Robby tried, if he tried to bring them to Mr. Miyagi early—nothing.

So he stepped back, let everything happen the way it had the first time and watched Mr. Miyagi and Daniel. He watched his father and Daniel fight on the beach, watched from the dark as Daniel trudged his bike home, all busted up and himself bruised and cursed the whole place, the whole world everything and how it wasn’t fair, throwing it away.

He watched Mr. Miyagi dig his bike out, spending the night repairing it.

He watched Daniel and Mr. Miyagi bond over quiet bonsai care, over hard work, watched Halloween happen, and the cobras corner Daniel, watched Mr. Miyagi save him, watched everything leading up to the All-Valley.

And that's when Robby couldn't stand back and watch anymore.

That was when his plans fell apart.

In that parking lot when Kreese got his hands on his dad, tried to kill him, Robby rushed in, he couldn't help it, he got his dad free but for just a moment before he was flung off and straight into one of the cars, hitting it hard enough to knock him out.

Chapter 16

Robby's knuckles stung, the skin had split, and he was bleeding.

On a level he might've blamed cobra kai.

Or the never ending loops.

Or the fact it was so damn hard to try and get Mr. Miyagi to do what he wanted.

Or that he was sick of seeing his dad choked out in a parking lot and seeing Daniel standing there doing nothing but watching. Like all of a sudden everything got real.

As if it hadn't been real all along.

And it pissed him off that after so many loops of seeing his dad and Daniel getting close that Daniel didn't try to help.

Or maybe he did.

But it was always Mr. Miyagi. Or him that seemed to try the hardest.

Robby throwing himself into the fray because he couldn't stand seeing Kreese hurt his dad.

And he couldn't beat the shit out of Kreese no matter how hard he tried.

So now this is where he was, some time before Halloween, standing there bleeding, heart pounding like crazy, so furious that his hands were shaking.

And there wasn't any one point that had set this off.

It was a collection of things that he'd thought he could be the better man about, that he could just sweep under the rug of his own emotions. Bottle up the way his dad seemed to, sometimes do. But he couldn't.

It exploded forth and he was pissed about everything.

Daniel was bleeding.

Why was it like this?

He wanted to scream.

Arms wrapped around him and he was pulled back and he turned around, prepared to punch Bobby in his dumb face.

But it wasn't Bobby.

"You?" Robby said his voice cracking. A feeling of betrayal rushing through him.

"That's enough."

"You're telling me that's enough? *You?"*

The arms around him tightened into a bear hug.

"This isn't you."

"How would you know?" Robby said trying to free himself but Johnny held on too tight.

"Because…this is…this is Cobra Kai," Johnny said softly. "This is all Kreese. I didn't realize it until you started. Like you just got so much angrier and angrier and this isn't you."

"What do you care?" Robby asked. "You don't care about me at all. None of you do. I'm just a fucking pawn. And if I didn't exist you'd all be happier. My parents would be happier. They didn't want me. No one wants me. Why am I even here? No one even bothered to try until now. Until it no longer matters."

Daniel was holding his arm and staring at him, breathing heavy.

"You said your dad wasn't there," Johnny said.

"No he wasn't."

"I know it's not any comfort but I've been thinking about it a lot."

Robby frowned, he wanted to shove Johnny away, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. There was something comforting in it. It sucked but his dad was really good at hugs, apparently no matter the era, which pissed him off. He should shove him off but he wanted to be hugged by his dad so badly that even when he was pissed it made him pause.

“I used to want to be a dad,” Johnny said softly. “The feeling would waffle. Like sometimes I thought if Ali got pregnant we’d make great parents. I mean if she wanted to be. And I’d prove Sid wrong, that I wasn’t going to be like my dad. But then I’d think about nature versus nurture. What if Sid is right? What if I don’t know how to be a good parent? What if all I know is what I’ve learned from the men in my life? Sid? My dad? The kid would never stand a chance. And when you started at Cobra kai…watching how quickly you got angry, and angrier…how no mercy filled your whole thoughts and being…how Kreese just fanned the flames of that. That’s my other one. What if I become like him? This summer I’d have said that’d be bad ass. That he’s the coolest toughest man I know. That any of my kids would become strong. Powerful. They’d have nothing to fear.

“But watching you. Seeing how easy it is to fall into this mindset, it makes me question it. For me…I think it was slow. I questioned it from time to time, but Kreese…he’s my hero. He’s my…he’s the closest thing I have to a father. It’s complicated. But you’re like a little brother, one who shouldn’t be getting in over your head like this and being urged on to do so. I mean look at your hand. If you kept going that wildly you would’ve broken it. And for what? Because Daniel talks fast? Got under your skin? I get it, but it’s not worth it. Right? Like this is his and my senior year. After this we’re gone. Are you going to throw away everything for that? Because of Cobra Kai? Because of Kreese?

“It makes me think that I would not be a good dad. Like what if I turn out like Kreese? Or Sid or my own dad? The kid would never have a chance to be good or nice or kind if I was around. All I’d know is this awful shit. I’d be a danger to my own kid. I thought I might be ready but I’m not. Robby you’re great, this isn’t…this isn’t what you should be going for, or worrying about. You should be having fun now that you’re here. You are wanted. We’re your friends, we like spending time with you. And I’m sure your parents—“

“Shut up,” Robby said, hoping for it to come out angry, to be fierce, but it wobbled, he could feel tears falling, blurring his vision.

If his dad felt this way now—

If his dad thought of him the way he thought of Kenny, he hated that he felt like he understood it.

Johnny shifted his grip, turning Robby, spinning him easy like a top and pulling him into a real hug and Robby cried into his shoulder,

holding on to his shirt, his stupid red cobra kai jacket tight in his own hand.

“They’d be happier without me,” Robby whispered.

“Not true,” Johnny said.

“They didn’t want me.”

“No way.”

“They want to be with someone else but because of me—If I didn’t exist, they’ll get their happy ending.”

“No chance,” Johnny said.

He pulled away for a moment, cupping Robby’s face and gently brushing away his tears.

“Your parents are…were maybe not ready. Some people suck at it. My step dad does for sure. But, and I want you to listen very carefully Robby. You are worthy of life, of love, of being here. Who cares what they want or wanted? You are here and that’s what’s important. I may have said I understood it, a little, but that wasn’t to say I wouldn’t want you here. If I was your dad I’d be so fucking proud of you. You’re smart, you’re strong, you quick witted, you’re a fucking bad ass. I’d love you with all my heart even if I didn’t trust myself to raise you.”

The tears came harder and Johnny smiled at him softly, pulling him back into the hug, his hand coming to the back of Robby’s head and it was so familiar. The way Johnny had hugged him before. Telling him to blame every bad thing on him, that Johnny…that his dad could take it. He’d carry everything, because Robby shouldn’t have to.

The cologne he wore was different, he wasn’t softer in spots, but it was the same.

“What the hell Johnny,” Dutch said. “That’s such a messed up thing to say.”

“What?” Johnny.

“Whoever had you as a dad would be lucky.”

“I doubt it. The only saving grace would come from my mother.”

“Well yeah but they’d also be lucky, because then they’d have us as uncles.”

Johnny laughed. “I’d feel even worse for them with that. Hey, LaRuss — Daniel are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Daniel said and Robby heard him getting up.

He knew he needed to apologize.

But he didn’t have the energy for it. All he could do was cry and hold onto his dad.

“You’re going to sleep so good tonight,” Johnny said softly with a warm chuckle. “Let it out. Don’t worry we’re not in the dojo. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

He hated that in that moment he did feel safe. And it made the tears worse. Everything he learned, everything he’d been through welling up.

All those time loops that had been warm and fun but had ended too soon, all the bruises on Johnny’s skin, the ones on his neck.

He missed home.

He missed home so much.

He missed his friends.

He missed the dojo. He missed Mr. LaRusso and his dad. He didn’t care that they didn’t see him.

He missed Demetri's incessant chatter.

He missed Kenny.

He missed his mom.

He missed Sam and Tory.

Hell he missed Miguel.

He didn’t know if he was going to exist there again. He didn’t know if he’d ever get to go home. And what if the universe didn’t want him? What if by fixing this time he was never born?

He heard movement behind him and another hand came to the back of his head, patting it gently and Robby turned his head to look at Daniel, face a bit bloody, but his eyes full of concern.

He'd tried to beat the shit out of him but because he was crying…

What was wrong with him?

What was wrong with both of them?

"Robby," Daniel said softly. "I lost my dad too. I know it's not the same, mine died, but, I know what it's like to just have the one parent doing their best. What it's like being in a new place where nothing makes sense. I know what it's like to be angry out of grief. Because that's what it is. Your dad's still alive but it's still grief for the relationship. That he could be there and isn't. It's grief for yourself. And I know what it's like to get so mad you lose control, I mean I've got fiery Italian blood."

"Is that what that is? I thought you were just a dumb punk," Johnny said with a laugh.

"If anyone is a punk it's you," Daniel said.

They bickered and it was weirdly comforting. Comforting to know he hadn't gone too far this time. That he'd been caught before it got worse. Before…

He'd never forget the look on Miguel's face when he went over that railing.

The sound of the school.

The sound of Miguel landing.

The accusatory, "What did you do?"

When it'd been an accident.

But if they were bickering then Daniel was fine.

He'd be fine.

"You're such an idiot," Daniel said.

It sounded weirdly fond.

Even now? He held onto his fathers jacket tighter.

“The point is…you don’t have to be alone,” Daniel said softly, his hand warm between his shoulder blades. “I know you’re doing Cobra Kai, and maybe in a way that’s helping, but honestly I think if I was in your shoes that’d be more fuel for that flame, more anger. I mean I struggle with it myself but Mr. Miyagi…he always calms me down. I could…introduce you if you want.”

“Trying to steal our teammate LaRusso?” Dutch asked.

“No. Just trying to help a…friend,” Daniel said. “Or what are you jealous? Do you *also* want to meet Mr. Miyagi?”

He heard Dutch grumble and his dad laugh.

“Honestly maybe we could all use a calming meeting with the guy. I mean Kreese treats it all like war and sometimes it feels like you’re in a battle for your life.”

Robby remembered all the bruises and sniffed, trying to rub at his eyes.

“But I mean we’re not actually preparing for a real war. We’re preparing for tournaments and for life and maybe we’ve taken it a step too far.”

"I'll meet him," Robby said. Because why not? Nothing else had worked with Mr. Miyagi yet.

Chapter 17

Robby didn't know how he felt sitting in Mr. Miyagi's workshop with Daniel sitting across from him bruised and battered knowing that he was that way because of Robby.

He thought…

He'd *hoped* the loop would restart and he wouldn't have to see the bruising or the injuries.

He thought he could just get it all out of his system and then have a fresh start. Like when he'd torn the gate off the hinges and smashed it to splintered pieces a few loops back.

Johnny and the guys had come in, bringing take out from a pizza place and it was funny to watch them trip over themselves to bow to Mr. Miyagi.

Robby had seen Mr. Miyagi. A lot. Mostly in passing, and of course the one time he'd followed the guy around like a creepy stalker.

But it was different to sit across from him in his workshop, to look at all the bonsai, hell to have the older man set one down in front of him and suddenly it was déjà v .

It was like he was back at LaRusso Auto.

Except it was different.

Daniel had been so excited to teach him. So excited to share this piece of his own history, of Mr. Miyagi's legacy. And even now Daniel was smiling despite the bruising as they sat down and looked at the bonsai trees and were given tiny shears.

And Robby didn't hesitate.

He knew how this worked.

He'd done enough of this with Mr. LaRusso.

"Johnny you can't just start!" Daniel said.

And Robby paused, turning to see his father snipping away at his tree with the same confidence he himself had jumped forward with.

Mr. Miyagi laughed.

“What? I— am I doing it wrong?”

“What even are you doing?” Bobby asked with a frown staring at his own tree.

“I read a bunch of books when Daniel said this is what we’re doing… you study the tree and decide what it’s trying to do, any beautiful features and then you trim and highlight to draw attention and focus to that spot…like any other art.”

“Hai,” Mr. Miyagi said amused. “Robby-san read same book?”

“Uh…no…um…the guy who originally taught me karate back home also…did bonsai work,” Robby said softly wondering how many people worked with bonsai in California in the 80s for that to seem plausible.

Mr. Miyagi studied him for a moment but then smiled. “Go ahead, try,” he said to both Johnny and Robby before turning to the other cobras and Robby took a deep breath and went back to work, picking up a pair of chopsticks and carefully plucking leaves that didn’t fit the tree's flow.

When he stopped, when he’d drawn all the attention into a natural curve of the boughs of the tree and sat back he noticed how dark it’d gotten. How quiet it was.

He looked around.

Daniel was asleep, face resting against his arms with a jacket under his head like a pillow. A red jacket.

When he turned his head he noticed the cobras were gone. All except for Johnny who was studying his bonsai with a frown, gently turning it in his pot.

“Done?” Mr. Miyagi asked.

“Yes sir,” Robby said. “Sorry for taking up so much of your time. I… got lost in it.”

“Apology not needed,” Mr. Miyagi said. “Other boys went home. Should also go home.”

Robby sat back looking at his tree then at his father who was

listening, and then at Daniel.

“Is he okay?” Robby asked.

“More worried about you,” Mr. Miyagi said, looking at Daniel with a fond smile. “Talk about Robby-san whole day.”

Somehow that just made Robby feel worse.

He’d really thought he’d be free and clear. Beat up Daniel one time and then restart but no the loop was torturing him. And Daniel was being nice.

Worried about him.

He felt eyes on him and he turned seeing his dad looking at him. Study him for a moment and he felt like he was under a microscope all of a sudden, seen clearly in a way he didn’t want.

“I’ll walk him up to his place and see you tomorrow," Johnny said and Robby watched him walk over to Daniel who he woke up with the gentlest of nudges and Daniel’s eyes opened and he frowned for a moment before catching sight of Johnny and grinning and Johnny was reaching for his jacket but Daniel was holding onto it too tight. Fighting over it, without words, somehow this loop when he hadn’t seen them interact in a positive way at all and now…now they were bickering without words.

How had they gotten so close?

But Daniel got up, putting on the jacket, zipping it up with a determined look and he watched his dad groan but follow Daniel out of the shop after Daniel gave them a little good night and Robby knew it was over. Just like that.

That sparked had already sparked.

And he sighed after they left. Feeling so very tired and drained all of a sudden.

“Is any of it ever worth it?” he murmured.

“Tomorrow morning, Robby-san here 6am,” Mr. Miyagi said.

Robby looked at him, startled having forgotten for a moment he was there before nodding. “Okay.”

He helped Mr. Miyagi clean up, putting away tools and then headed back to his place.

“Robby-san,” Mr. Miyagi said.

Robby turned, hand on the door, looking at the bonsai held out to him.

“Thank you Mr. Miyagi,” Robby said taking it carefully from him.

He carried it back to the Fernandez’s, to Freddy’s room, to setting it by the window before sinking onto the trundle bed he slept on that pulled out from under Freddy’s bed.

“How’d it go?” Freddy asked looking up from his book.

Freddy usually was reading something. Robby had learned in passing that he’d spent a few loops taking things apart, learning how they worked, and putting them back together again. That he could repair just about anything at this point.

That he’d graduated with degrees in just about everything that had interested him.

And now read about new things just for fun.

His current for fun read was a law book. How that was fun Robby didn’t know and he dreaded reaching the point where it would be.

“Fine. When will this loop end?” Robby asked.

It was a rhetorical question.

“Don’t end it *prematurely* again,” Freddy said.

Robby could hear his frown. His disapproval.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t done that before.”

“I have,” Freddy said. “It’s how I knew it hurt. But you shouldn’t.”

“You sound like my dad.”

“I’m old enough at this point to be a very old ancestor of yours, but I am your dad’s age.”

Robby rolled away from him, facing towards the bonsai in the window

before sitting up and facing Freddy. He couldn't see well from the lower position of the trundle bed but he saw the book flip over, settled with its cover and spine facing upwards.

Freddy was waiting.

"What if you're wrong?" Robby asked.

"About what?"

"About me? About why you picked me?"

He heard movement and then Freddy moved so he was able to see Robby better.

"You mean that it restarts any time you don't exist?"

"Yeah."

It was barely a whisper.

Robby wasn't looking at him, he was staring at a poster of Selena.

"Why do you think that?"

"They just seem happier…and the way they seem happier would mean I wouldn't exist."

"You've lost me."

"You mean you haven't, in all your years, decades doing this, you haven't run into them?"

"Robby, I won't know unless you tell me what it is you're talking about. I may have been around for a long time but I can't read minds."

"My dad's gay," Robby said looking at Freddy, angry and pissed that there were tears in his eyes. "Okay? And he and Mr. LaRusso in every fucking loop end up together. And if they end up together and are happy then where does that leave me huh? What happens to any of us? Sam? Anthony? Me?"

"Huh," Freddy said.

"What huh?"

"Well I thought he was just super drunk—but no that makes sense

then. I found your dad once at a rock concert. I was working back stage trying to figure out where he'd gone and knew he liked the band. I'd lost track of him for a while and Daniel was well…he was him, he was on his normal track but I couldn't figure what rock I'd skipped that sent Johnny off his normal path and the only clue I had when I'd asked Bobby was that he'd probably be at the rock concert for this band next time they were in town. And I found him. He was back stage making out with the lead guitarist. I hadn't been sure I'd actually found him because it was dark and they'd picked a dark corner, but…now I wonder. I mean I thought it was him but I also hadn't been able to ever confirm it. That guitarist would've broken me in half. Let alone your dad if it was him."

Freddy looked thoughtful. "But I also found him with plenty of women throughout the years. So I don't think you really have anything to worry about with your existence. Like your dad may like dudes but he still also sleeps with women."

"Yeah but if he's happiest with Mr. LaRusso then he's never going to meet my mom and I'm never going to exist."

"So Daniel and Johnny have a thing for each other. Well that opens up doors, but it doesn't mean you're not going to exist."

"But it'd be better if—"

"No Robby. No. I know from all my time doing this that you are a linchpin. There are a few. You must exist. Mr. Miyagi and Daniel must get close. Johnny must become disillusioned with Cobra Kai. Sometimes Daniel meets Silver, some times he doesn't. Sometimes he goes to Okinawa with Mr. Miyagi…sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes Johnny goes. It's weird. But I had my kids, I grew old on a trip where Johnny left the country and traveled the world instead of becoming a handyman. And he ran into Mr. Miyagi in Boston in the 90s and met Julie. And then he came back to LA in time to meet your mother and have you and then ran into Daniel again through Julie at Mr. Miyagi's funeral. Like in that one Daniel went to Fresno of all places, never met Terry Silver, never won his second award, hell he never went to Okinawa. Still had kids. So I feel like I got close you know?

"And I've studied this. A lot. Intensely. What affect on the world is it if I take all the chocolate milks and Johnny has to have 2% with his lunch on the third Thursday of November? What happens if I move Daniel's chair a half an inch to the right when he gets up during his math test to go sharpen his pencil?

“What happens if I steal Daniel’s dry cleaning on March 31st 2011? What happens if Johnny gets a flat, with my help, on June 1st, 2017? I’ve studied this from every angle and I reached a dead end. I did everything from big changes to small. But Robby you are meant to exist. Even if you doubt it, even if you think I’m wrong, I know what the facts and what decades and decades of studying this loop, this time line under a microscope has yielded. And you are meant to be.

“I was stuck and I picked you.”

“Why? Why me?” Robby asked and it came out sharper, wetter than he meant it to be. “Even if I'm a linchpin. Why not Miguel or Sam? Or Demetri? They’re all smart, smarter.”

“You are smart Robby. Very smart. And you’ve got a good heart. Your classmates, the kids studying karate would never work. They don’t know Daniel or Johnny well enough. Miguel is a good kid and he adores your father but he doesn’t know him the way you do. And Sam knows her own father but…the only one to know them **both** is you. You studied with Mr. LaRusso and it may have originally been a scam but you tried everything you could to embody Miyagi-do karate. You lived with Daniel and his family. You were a part of their family.”

“A lot of good it did me. He threw me under the bus the first time I screwed up.”

“And he knew that. Regretted it as soon as he calmed down. You’ve met him now. He’s got a short fuse but he also cares with his whole heart. He loves everyone who will let him. He took the grief and loss of his father and the unfairness of this situation and tried to still make people laugh.”

Robby thought of Daniel on the beach with Ali trying to cheer her up. He thought of the boy he walked with along the beach who stopped to talk to anyone, who danced to the music someone had playing on a boombox, not caring what anyone thought. The guy who lived so freely. Daniel who whenever Robby gave him an inch embraced him as a new friend. Like it was easy.

Robby’s stomach twisted as he glanced down at his knuckles, studying the red scabbed skin.

“So I know Mr. LaRusso, so what? I don’t know my father.”

“But you *do.* You’ve seen him more than you let on. You remember more than you let on. And despite everything you love him. You care

for them both even if you're pissed at them, and it gives you a clearer view of them both. More so than any of your peers. No one else can do it. No one else can cause so much change as to unearth the fact they have so much tension, sexual or romantic, like you did. I didn't know that and I've studied them like bugs, like microorganisms, or hell like the stars. I could never find your father on certain days. Everywhere I scoured for him and I couldn't find him and yet you did. And even when you're not looking for them you find them. It is you Robby. You're the perfect person to help me because of this."

Robby sunk back onto the bed staring up at the popcorn ceiling with a frown.

"Really Robby. These loops have all been different than any others I've done. You give me hope."

"At least one of us has hope."

Chapter 18

Robby was ready at 7am, standing next to the empty pool when Mr. Miyagi walked up.

“Robby-san ever go fishing?” Mr. Miyagi asked.

“My last sensei had fish in his pond.”

“In **boat**,” Mr. Miyagi said sounding amused and walking towards the gate.

Robby followed with a wince.

How many times did he avoid that gate? Because the sound made him think he restarted? The creak of it made him feel like his world had turned upside down all over and that nothing was worth it.

But it was just a cool morning when he stepped through the gate and followed Mr. Miyagi to an old beat up truck.

Mr. Miyagi tossed him some keys and Robby scrambled to catch them.

“Uh…I—”

“Robby-san drive.”

Robby stared at the keys, at the old truck and he got in, carefully sinking into the old leather.

For a moment he was little again, when the steering wheel was taller than him.

“See that thing down there?”

“Yeah!”

“That’s the gas pedal. It makes it go forward. The one to the left, which one’s left bud?”

Robby curled his hand into the shape of an L and then turned it into a finger gun, watching his dad grin.

“Correct. That’s the breaks. The breaks stop the car. But you gotta be

careful because it's like when you're going real fast on your board and are trying to stop or make a turn. The car stops, but it keeps going a little bit and you go forward with it until it finally stops. You gotta give yourself space to actually stop."

Robby had nodded, kicking his feet a little because he couldn't reach the pedals.

"And this is a gear shift, so you see these letters? What's this letter?"

"P."

"Yup. And what's the car doing?"

"Nothing."

"Right because it's?"

"Parked!"

"P for parked. Correct. And this letter is?"

"R…race?"

"I like what you're thinking, R is correct and R is for reverse. It means to go backwards."

"N," Robby said staring and frowning.

"N is for neutral. So this is helpful if you don't really want the car on but you want to move it. So you know how sometimes in movies you see people having to get out and push a car?"

"Yeah."

"The car has to be in neutral for that."

"D...drive?"

"Exactly! So if we picked D, which way would the car go?"

Robby pointed forward.

"And R?"

Robby pointed behind him.

"So want to drive with me around a little bit?"

Robby craned to see over the wheel and Johnny had smiled moving the seat so Robby could sit on his lap, pointing out the mirrors, pointing out all the other knobs, letting Robby turn on the windshield wipers, the turn signals, the lights, letting him honk the horn.

And then they drove, very slowly through the parking lot with Robby guiding the wheel one way and then another, doing figure eights, parking. Changing gears, reversing.

The truck was older, a little different but he still knew what to do and Mr. Miyagi hummed as Robby drove, a song Robby didn't know, occasionally giving him directions until they ended up at a lake.

He wondered if it was the lake that Mr. LaRusso had mentioned, where he'd studied when he was younger.

He parked and then helped Mr. Miyagi with the boat, getting it to the boat launch and then returning for the gear.

He didn't know what he expected.

Mr. LaRusso style cryptic lessons and guidance.

But what he got was…fishing.

Hours of sitting on the water, fishing pole in hand, waiting for a bite.

Silence.

It was silent when Mr. LaRusso taught him. But usually because he left Robby to continue whatever practice or task there was.

This was different.

It was *too* quiet. The only sound was the water lapping against the hull of the boat.

He could hear his own breathing, his own heart.

Why was he holding all the cards so close to his chest?

He was with Mr. Miyagi.

The guy who knew all the answers according to Mr. LaRusso.

"I—"

“Hmm?”

“I’m not catching anything.”

“Patience.”

“How long do you have to be patient?”

“Depends.”

Robby sighed then turned to look at Mr. Miyagi, sitting peacefully with his fishing rod.

He could ask him anything.

But what?

What was worth asking.

“Do you like vampires?”

Mr. Miyagi laughed. “Vampires?”

“Yeah…do you like them?”

Mr. Miyagi shrugged. “Miyagi not have strong feelings.”

Well…Mr. LaRusso certainly had.

But he was avoiding the topic. The main idea.

“I know you don’t know me,” Robby said softly looking at the water, watching it glitter in the morning sun. “But I— I do feel bad about Daniel. I was just so mad. I **am** so mad. I mean— what is the point of me being here you know? What use am I in the grand scheme of things? I tried to do things earnestly and it didn’t work out. I tried to do what I wanted and it didn’t work out. I’ve read all the books I wanted to. I’ve studied everything even the stuff no one wanted me to study. I mean cobra kai, no one wanted me to join that and I did and I listened to Kreese and I wasn’t scared of him. But…I know I should be. I know it’s wrong and I get how easy it is to get swept away in it all. But again, what’s the point? Why shouldn’t I just roll into the water and not come up?”

Robby didn’t see it coming, but before he knew it he was in the water and he came up spluttering.

“Came up,” Mr. Miyagi said, studying him. “Keep going because spark still there. Can’t give in.”

Robby sighed and helped himself up into the boat.

“Miyagi fight with best friend,” Mr. Miyagi said softly. “Long time ago.”

“Yeah? How’d that go?” Robby asked.

“Miyagi came to America in a boat. Never spoke to best friend again.”

Robby blinked looking at Mr. Miyagi.

“Miyagi have lots of regrets. Miss father, best friend, love of life a whole world away. But still found love, had son. Made friends. Sometimes wonder if worth it. But then think…then see photo of Mrs. Miyagi and think...Miyagi was loved. And do not want to disappoint or let Mrs. Miyagi down,” Mr. Miyagi poked Robby in the chest with the tip of his fishing rod.

“Hard to love self sometimes. When things bad. When always fighting, struggling. But if not good enough for self. Find something else. Miyagi start with bonsai. Focus on bonsai. Bonsai need Miyagi for water, sunlight. Then focus on cars. Cars rust, need upkeep, care. Then house and garden. Living things need Miyagi and Miyagi find space… peace in small moments. Not easy. Hard work. But must try. One step at time. Hmm?”

“But—”

“Start as small as Robby-san need.”

Robby frowned, looking the puddle he was dripping at the bottom of the boat and then suddenly there was a towel and he took it drying off and returning to fishing, with plenty to think about to fill the quiet morning.

Chapter 19

It was weird to be with Mr. Miyagi. Learning from him.

He *knew* Miyagi-do.

He knew the tricks to being taught.

He understood it.

So he thought he understood Mr. Miyagi.

“Hey Mr. Miyagi what kind of belt do you have?”

And Mr. Miyagi looked at his belt around his waist. “JCPenny. You want one? We go get.”

And the look on Daniel’s face made Robby laugh.

“Hey Mr. Miyagi, can you teach me how to sweep?” Daniel asked one afternoon.

“Hai hai,” Mr. Miyagi said dipping into his workshop and getting a broom and then sweeping with it.

Daniel got frustrated and Robby watched him walk of grumbling to himself while Mr. Miyagi cracked a smile.

At school while he was perusing the books trying to pick out something new to read he stopped in the jokes section and checked out a few joke books, carrying them back to the apartment complex and finding Mr. Miyagi in his office.

“Mr. Miyagi?”

“Hai?”

“Do you know the difference between a zippo and a hippo?”

Mr. Miyagi blinked, looking up from his tree.

“Z and H?”

“One weighs a ton and the other is a little *lighter*.”

Mr. Miyagi laughed and Robby grinned.

“Do you knock on your refrigerator door before you open it?”

“No,” Mr. Miyagi said turning towards him.

“You should, there might be salad dressing in there.”

Robby flipped to the next page he'd bookmarked.

“Do you know why people feel tired on the first of April?”

“No. Because fools day?”

“It’s because they finished a 31 day March.”

Mr. Miyagi laughed again and Robby grinned.

“Life better when not serious.”

“Yeah…yeah I get that,” Robby said and he thought he did.

So he tried it out, from time to time. Bad puns. Bad jokes and making the cobras laugh.

In-between lessons he studied card tricks, trying to learn the ones his dad had done and trying to enjoy the moment, the way he had been when he’d been spending time with his grandmother.

He helped Mr. Miyagi when he could and then he found himself in the dojo and it was weird.

It was so weird to be at Miyagi-do before it became Miyagi-do. Before it had the balance wheel, before there was much of a pond. When it was just Mr. Miyagi’s house.

And he stood with Daniel in Mr. Miyagi’s kitchen watching him cook, learning how he made certain things.

A new tradition.

Daniel showed him how to make pasta with Lucille in her apartment and it was weird that a few weeks ago his knuckles had been red with Daniel’s blood and now they were laughing in his apartment making pasta from scratch.

And pizza.

And cookies.

And the guys came and went, coming in to say hi and to watch and learn and to leave with a full belly.

Or to watch his dad join them. Studying how Mr. Miyagi cooked, how Lucille cooked, soaking it all up and Robby tried to think of when he'd seen his dad cook.

Recently? Not much.

His fridge had been abysmally bare.

But as a kid?

He remembered sitting on the countertop while his dad worked, watching him work.

He'd cried because he'd wanted dinosaur pancakes and his dad had told him their restaurant wasn't open yet.

But Robby was hungry then and he remember he cried because it wasn't fair that the place was closed.

And his dad had scooped him up and set him on the counter and said. "Well how about we do our best? It might not be the same but we can still try. Do you want to try and see if *we* can make them?"

And he helped his dad using a butter knife level off different white powders wondering how they turned into pancakes, helping him whisk, helping him put in blueberries, munching on a few and then staring at the purple on his hands in surprise.

He remembered watching his dad work over the stove top, so focused, trying to get them perfect, cursing softly when he flipped them and looking…embarrassed when he sat them down in front of Robby, when he was sitting at the table with syrup and butter.

"Sorry kiddo, I know it's not the same—"

But they'd been perfect. They were charming, they had so much character to them.

And now? Now his dad was helping Mr. Miyagi with fish, or he was filling in the cream of cannoli's and Daniel was leaning in close and whispering something in his ear that made him over stuff the cannoli and Johnny's face turn red and Robby wondered if in the future, if this is how it could be.

If rather than being worried about Lucille hating him because he had liked Sam, if instead they could have big family meals they cooked together. If his father and Mr. LaRusso could enjoy cooking together.

Any time together whatsoever.

Because Mr. Miyagi was right, having fun was necessary and maybe they all needed more of that.

Robby kept telling his bad jokes, he kept learning anything Mr. Miyagi or Lucille chose to impart. And he worked on his bonsai.

So when he heard the creak of the gate again he was relieved but also he had a better idea of what he wanted to do…what he needed to try next.

Chapter 20

It was like Freddy said, a lot of trial and error. But Robby added new things into his life during each of them. He built ramps with Zak, he didn't re-join cobra kai even though he missed that emerald jacket. He dog walked for fun, playing with puppies. He helped some elderly neighbors carry in groceries from their cars. He got to know other people beyond Daniel and Johnny.

He expanded his world.

He spent hours with Barbara and Susie and Ali watching movies, amused at how much they liked horror and action and realizing what a soft ball that had been for his dad and Ali to date.

He went to parties and he baked and he tried for a bit to just be a teenager, while also gently trying to change things. Like meeting up with Johnny on day one. Letting himself be a bridge between Daniel and Johnny.

Because that worked.

Because as soon as Johnny came racing down the hill and saw Robby who he'd spent his afternoon with he stopped, and Daniel stopped and the fight just fizzled out.

It was remarkable. They still bickered, but there wasn't as much blood. They still tussled, Daniel still complained to Mr. Miyagi and started to learn to defend himself should Johnny and his cobras go too far in that secret way Mr. Miyagi taught.

And Robby made adjustments.

He made it past the all-valley, he ended up right back at the start when he managed to actually jump Kreese and start beating the shit out of him for trying to kill his dad.

So he avoided the parking lot that night because him interfering seemed to be a big no.

He couldn't trust himself to be close so every time he made Freddy distract him.

And then he made it to graduation and into uncharted territory.

Freddy mapped out what he knew now that they were there.

He explained Okinawa and Robby decided he wanted to go.

It was hard to get it right. He needed to be close enough to Mr. Miyagi and Daniel to actually make it work, to go.

The first time he tried Daniel told him he had it and ran off without him, not telling him the how or where or when.

The second time he borrowed the truck and drove Daniel to the airport and got a “Thanks” and then he ran off and Robby didn’t get to join.

So the tenth time Robby got Johnny to drive after a year of studying with Mr. Miyagi and talking Johnny into joining them for some kata.

And that worked.

But he looked back and saw his dad in the drivers seat of the Avanti looking sad, left behind and he wondered if he could take Johnny to Okinawa too.

He focused on getting there on every little detail he’d gotten through to get there and then he managed to piss Chozen off upon meeting him so badly that as soon as he tried to crush Chozen’s hand back during the handshake he ended up right back at the gate.

“Welcome back,” Freddy said.

“How the hell do you do Okinawa?”

“It’s tricky,” Freddy said. “You gotta be careful not to light the powder keg that it is.”

So Robby did it all again. He got his passport, and he followed all the same main steps until he was back in Okinawa greeting Chozen politely and trying not to make ripples. Which was the antithesis of what he had been doing.

Up until then he’d been making every ripple he could. But it was frustrating to have gotten this far and start back over.

And he did.

When Chozen punched Daniel in the stomach Robby punched Chozen in the face and bam, right back at the gate.

So, frustrated, he tried to get Johnny to Okinawa. And that seemed to give him more of a buffer, when it worked the fifth try. He couldn't do much with what happened with Daniel or Chozen or Mr. Miyagi or Sato he realized. Johnny could, but *he* couldn't. So he focused on other things. Remembering Zak and Mr. Miyagi's advice to have fun and to start small.

He tried to learn dance with Kumiko. Tea ceremony with Yukie. He picked up bits and pieces of Okinawan and then he spent a round studying with the kids until he could speak it. He studied the sanshin, he explored the island and then, to his surprise after a storm on the 25th round he found himself going home, safe and sound with Johnny, Daniel and Mr. Miyagi.

And Johnny went back to his life, back to the cobras and picking out a college or struggling to bring himself to go and he hung out with Daniel and Mr. Miyagi and helped clean the new shop and then came Silver.

He'd been so busy enjoying the idea that he could learn pottery across the street with Jessica Andrews and go rock climbing with her that he forgot about Terry Silver.

And it was like a shock that went through him.

Chozen hadn't been scary but that was because he'd met him. He knew that *eventually* Chozen calmed down. But Silver was a wolf in sheep's clothing and he zero'd in on Daniel, buttering him up with his ego and Robby watched his relationship with Mr. Miyagi fray.

He tried fighting Silver, but one kick and he was back at the gate.

He *wanted* to fight him.

He wanted blood for Kenny, for all the cobras of himself.

He let himself play pawn with Daniel the way he'd played cobra for Kreese, and he watched the way Silver taught, the brutal way in which Daniel hurt himself and Robby went with it till his knuckles bled leaving the dojo and then stopping, Daniel bumping into him because standing on the sidewalk with wide-eyes was Johnny.

Johnny looked at Robby, then at Daniel and before he knew it they were in the Avanti and he was sitting in the back and Daniel and Johnny were arguing.

“What are you doing?”

“Learning to fight?”

“So hard that your knuckles are bleeding?”

“So what? What do you care?”

“You know this isn’t the way you fight.”

“Why can’t it be? I have a sensei who will take me to the next level!”

“By breaking you.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t even know him.”

“Yeah well what dojo are you in huh? What dojo did you leave Mr. Miyagi for?”

And the silence was deafening.

“Pull over.”

“No.”

“Pull over.”

“Daniel, what dojo are you in?”

“Cobra Kai.”

Johnny pulled over.

“You went to Cobra Kai? After everything? After everything my sensei did? And you took Robby with you?”

“Your sensei is dead.”

Robby knew his dad had a fraught relationship with Kreese. That he probably, several times a day, wished the man was dead. But he watched Johnny’s face, watched a part of his heart crumble and he leaned forward trying to catch it before it broke.

“He’s not,” Robby said.

“He is, Silver came to the dojo and told me Kreese regretted everything and so Silver came to find me to apologize and there’s this guy who wants me to fight in the all-valley and won’t leave me alone

and Mr. Miyagi won't teach me so Mr. Silver is and—"

"He regretted…*you*?" Johnny said softly. "**You?** He regretted what happened to you and not…me?"

It was spinning out, fast, the thread falling apart and Robby watched his father spiral, he knew that look, he'd seen it, he knew he was one wrong breath from going to a bar and not coming up again until it was time to get into a fight or closing.

And he waited for Daniel to continue, for him to release the finishing blow, the way Mr. LaRusso would've but instead he reached out, putting his arm on Johnny's.

"I'm sure he did, but Mr. Silver didn't get that last wish you know? He regretted how the tournament went and he found me. And I *need* him. These guys are tearing up Mr. Miyagi's shop and they stole all our bonsais and tried to kill us."

"Like Chozen?" Johnny asked softly.

"Worse."

Johnny let out a shaky sigh and Daniel pulled him into a hug. A tight hug and he watched his dad bury his face in Daniel's shoulder.

"I know, I know, It's okay to cry for him," Daniel murmured and Robby sat just watching them, not sure what to do. Not sure what comfort to give when Johnny was holding onto Daniel so tight. There wasn't any room for him to do anything.

Start small.

Do what you want.

Robby waited, and he breathed, letting the feeling pass.

His dad pulled away, rubbing at his face. "Why didn't you tell me that people were harassing you? The guys and I—"

"Would what come to my rescue? My heroes?"

"We know karate."

"Against Mike Barnes?"

"**That** bastard?" Johnny asked, nose wrinkling.

“You know him?”

“I know *of* him,” Johnny said. “What other guy takes out fucking full page ads calling himself karate’s bad boy in the karate magazines? Dude’s fucking full of himself. What the hell is he doing in LA?”

Johnny leaned back taking in a deep breath, sighing and looking up at the sky.

“Daniel…don’t get mad.”

“About what?”

“But why would karate’s bad boy from San Francisco come to LA for an under 18 tournament to harass you?”

“I dunno maybe he wanted to come for the champ?”

“But *this* year? Why didn’t he harass *me* the last **two** years?”

“I dunno maybe he didn’t want to bust your pretty face.”

Someone save him they were flirting. Again.

“No Daniel, I mean. It makes no sense for him to be in LA. The All-Valley gives you a trophy *not* money.”

“But—”

“Daniel what’s his motivation?”

“He wants to win.”

“But why you? Why does it have to be **you** that always has to fight in these weird fights? Why are **you** the one training in such a way that you’re getting hurt?”

Robby had seen Daniel start to get defensive, start to get angry about it until as Johnny spoke, as his voice got soft, lifting up one of Daniel’s hands so gingerly.

“You won with Mr. Miyagi’s type of training. And I…me and the guys could teach you Cobra Kai and you wouldn’t have to do this. We could call for videos from the tournaments Barnes has been in. We could talk strategy. Do you *have* to go to Cobra Kai for that? To a guy who’s making you hurt yourself? Making you **bleed**? Why would you put yourself through that? We’ve only ever been a phone call away, and

after everything…this is— this is what you picked? This Silver guy to teach you rather than…me?"

Did they forget he was there?

Was his dad always this fucking cheesy? It was like he was in a bad soap opera. But then again, *everything* related to those two had been a cheesy bad soap opera.

"Can you teach me a front sweep? Silver said it's the only way to defeat a guy like Barnes."

"Yes I can teach you a front sweep, I can also teach you 20 ways to turn it against the guy who uses it. Daniel I think you're being had. Let's get you home and bandaged up huh?"

Johnny drove them back to Mr. Miyagi's and Robby wondered about the yellow Ford left sitting a block or two away from the Cobra Kai dojo but he supposed Daniel was too smitten to care.

Instead he got to Mr. Miyagi's and sat in the living room with a cup of tea while Johnny bandaged up Daniel's hands and they spoke softly to each other, making plans to study karate together.

It happened 5 more times, each more uncomfortable than the last.

Sometimes Johnny found them earlier, sometimes later, sometimes not at all and Robby had no understanding of what worked and what didn't, but he kept trying.

He put his effort into gardening at Mr. Miyagi's.

He planted a few trees, a few flowers, a bush or two that were native and he remembered in sore need in the future and he replanted them each time and he took care of them.

His small steps.

And sometimes he snuck laxatives into Silver's coffee, since that didn't seem to throw him back to the gate, unlike the few times he'd tried out right to fight Silver.

And then suddenly he was at the second All-Valley and he decided to compete, for fun. Even though he knew Mr. Miyagi didn't approve, he told him he just wanted to try it. And he did okay, but Barnes was brutal and every knock out ended up with a game over and start back

at the beginning so he stopped entering. Barnes was on a warpath specifically for Silver and that was a boss he couldn't defeat now.

So he tried new things.

He followed Johnny instead. To school, to not school, to random jobs, hanging out with the cobras trying to figure out what to do with life. He worked odd jobs with his dad.

They were waiters at shitty restaurants.

They worked at a video rental store where he caught his father once in the back looking at the adult videos with a frown, having picked up one with two men on the cover and he pretended he'd never noticed.

They worked in a bakery, they did street magic and with some urging Robby tried to talk him into applying to join the castle. And Robby made that a goal for a few rounds. Studying and practicing magic until finally they got in. And it was fun to meet other magicians and run shows for guests and do all the bright sparkly on stage stuff.

But when he wasn't with his dad, he knew things were happening. Any time Johnny went home he came back with bruises and rather low. If Robby didn't find him quickly, if Johnny didn't find Daniel, then the next time he saw him his dad was on a bender.

And then there were the photos. The photoshoots of Johnny and the guy who tried to talk his dad into more and for some reason no matter what Robby did to try and talk his dad out of it, out of the photoshoots and the modeling, it always happened, and the few times he successfully talked him out of it he ended up back at the gate.

"Add another lynchpin," Robby grumbled from the trundle bed at Freddy's room back in 1984.

"Which one was that one?"

"My dad *has* to be a model."

"I didn't realize your dad modeled. What magazine? That's so cool!"

"No Freddy it's not," Robby grumbled. "The camera guy is totally being a creep and trying to take advantage of him so I don't get why I can't change it."

"Have you tried using Daniel to change it? Like when you used

Johnny to change Okinawa or Silver?"

Robby frowned, groaned. "No," he said.

So he tried. Tried to talk Daniel into joining him for this photoshoot his dad was doing and Daniel was too busy with Silver. So he tried again.

And Robby wanted to walk into the sea and never return because Daniel and his dad got too close too fast.

"He wants me to do film," Johnny said after the cameraman left, still leaning with his shirt off, doused in baby oil against a rock and Daniel was staring and Robby *knew* he was staring, directly at his dad's chest and he didn't know what to do or where to look and Daniel was being worthless.

"What kind of film?" Robby asked feeling sick, having a feeling from the creep and wondering why his dad had no stranger danger alarms.

"Dunno, he just said I'd be great at it."

"Has he seen you act? Have you done any acting before? Do you have to do an audition?"

"No," Johnny said and he said it softly enough that Daniel finally pulled his attention away and looked at Johnny's face and then back at Robby and then back at Johnny.

"Woah woah woah, you didn't audition? You've never done acting and the guy who—" Daniel turned away towards where the guy had been taking photos and Robby watched him put the pieces together. The things he knew but for some reason his dad didn't.

"Johnny," Daniel said grabbing his arm. "I think the only time stuff like this happens, it's porn."

Johnny blinked, surprised and then frowned looking at the sand like he was thinking about it. Like even after being confronted with it he was still contemplating it.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"You really want to do porn? Why the hell do you want to do porn?"

“Well why couldn’t I do it?”

“Why do you **want** to?”

“I don’t *want* to.”

“Then why do it? Is it just that you haven’t gotten laid in a bit because if that’s the case—”

“No it’s not that, I just…the Avanti’s engine is practically kaput and Sid’s not going to give me money and my expenses are already tight and this is like $100 for a half hour, where else am I going to make money that fast? And the video, well he said it’d be easy and easy money.”

“Easy money always comes with a catch Johnny,” Daniel said with a sigh. “Let me—bring the Avanti to Mr. Miyagi’s. Maybe we can fix it and if not—well he has all those cars maybe you can drive one of them? Or if not **I** can drive you to things in the Ford.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that—”

Daniel put a finger to Johnny’s lips, he stood in close.

“Let me help.”

Somehow Robby kept from walking into the ocean and he focused on how time continued to move forward. How he watched Daniel and Mr. Miyagi work on the car, how Johnny sat with lemonade on the deck, trying to learn what they were doing, riding around in the Ford with Daniel.

And then time marched every onward and Robby felt disconcerted by how it moved further and further past his real age, from the time in which he had left his own timeline.

He became a man trying to keep in touch with people as more parts of life became familiar. DVD’s and computers, even if they were clunky, becoming more and more popular, CD’s instead of cassettes and 8 tracks, as the smog filled skies started to clear a bit, as chains he remembered from his childhood started to match closer to what he knew.

And then he lost track of Johnny and had to reach out to Freddy again, during one of their periodic check-ins.

“Where is he? Bobby doesn’t know, the guys don’t know, it’s like he dropped off the face of the map.”

Freddy looked at the calendar and at his watch then motioned for Robby to join him and they walked through the streets of LA.

“I thought we were going to get lunch.”

“We can eat there, but I don’t know if you’ll want to.”

Robby frowned as they walked into a bar and sat in a back booth. Music played softly and Robby looked around, feeling an ill sense of familiarity about the place but unsure why.

He looked over the menu and then he heard a laugh.

A laugh he knew and he hadn’t heard in ages that made his heart ache.

And he saw her.

He saw his mother laughing her hand on a familiar man’s arm, flirting the way he wished he wasn’t familiar with.

“My mom,” Robby said softly.

Chapter 21

He had missed his mother so much and it took so much effort to not go up to her, to not talk to her, to not embrace her.

“This is a lynch-pin. Your dad gets a job here, originally as a bartender and then— well— you’ll see.”

And Robby watched the way she leaned in, could barely hear her.

“Oh come on, don’t you want to get up on that stage and dance? It’s so *freeing*.”

“Is it?”

“I mean we barely have any customers, and you’ve been here for weeks. Everyone tries it.”

And he watched as his dad shrugged and followed her to the stage.

“Can you dance?”

“Not the kind that’s usually done on this stage. What do I do?” He asked looking at her.

“You feel the music and you respond to it. Let it run over you like the caress of a lover and respond in turn. Plus I know you’ve been watching.”

Robby felt his face burn, that he was here for such an embarrassing moment and he wanted to disappear under the table as his mother turned on the music and stepped aside and his father moved to the center of the stage.

Robby glanced at Freddy who just smiled, which didn’t warn him what type of train-wreck this was going to be.

“Can we change the song?” Johnny said.

“Sure, different genre?”

“Rock. That song you guys played last night.”

She grinned, swapping out the CD and pushing play and rather than stand rooted in the spot like he had when the pop song had been

playing his dad moved.

Fast.

Robby had been raised by his mother. He was highly defensive of dancers and their art and any working person. He knew his mom was good, he knew the staff was good.

What he didn't expect was for his dad to be good. His dad who he had never seen dance.

But he'd never really seen his father do many artistic things or express himself and his mother said this type of dancing was an expression of a person, an intimate expression.

As his dad danced, it was he noticed, a bit like a karate routine. Like the kata Mr. LaRusso did only slower, sensual, Johnny's control was remarkable.

And then for a second he frowned, because he recognized the routine.

He watched as his dad walked up to the pole, the way he wrapped around it, rolled and then when the routine was over he heard applause and watched his mother run up.

"You memorized *my* routine!" she said.

"Well you're always so good at it. No one can take their eyes off of you when you're up here."

And she blushed and smiled and for a moment Robby kind of got it, saw that for one moment in time when they hadn't been in survival mode only, when things hadn't been desperate and hard, how they had found each other.

"Do you think they could've been happy together?" Robby asked softly.

"I've tried," Freddy said patting Robby's shoulder and sipping on a coke he'd ordered, pushing a cherry coke to Robby. "A lot of it is the crush of finances. He's got nothing but this job and he's embarrassed by it so he doesn't talk to the guys and so he doesn't have a support system. He's in a tiny studio right now above a pizza joint and usually eventually he nips at the drinks while he's working when it gets bad. And when it gets **bad** she goes to her dealer. And then she gets pregnant and they try, but then his mother gets sick and that's like the

last straw and she gets terrified because suddenly she's alone and she doesn't want her parents to be right so she doesn't call out to them. She tries to do it alone and she's pissed that he couldn't hang in there for it. For her. For you. And then…well it all crashes apart and whatever pulled them together implodes so fast. And there's no way to save your grandmother. I tried. She just gets sick, and it's so sudden and fast and no matter how hard I try to catch it early, I can't move *when* it happens. It always aligns in the worst way. And he just never recovers, and she never recovers from him not being there. And the lack of money and their expensive coping mechanisms makes it all way worse."

"Then what's the point?" Robby asked. "If they're just going to be miserable and unhappy?"

"The point is you," Freddy said. "Or at least I think it is."

He heard clapping, slow clapping and then turned to see a man walk out.

"Didn't know you had any moves Mr. Lawrence. How about doing routines a couple nights a week? Get out from behind the bar?"

"I don't know."

"The tips are better," Shannon said.

"How would it work?" Johnny asked getting off the stage, walking with who Robby assumed was the manager from back then.

He wondered what his options were. If he could make his parents less miserable. Because if they were less miserable then maybe **they** could **all** be happy.

Robby went to the club more times than he cared to admit. Studying it like he was planning a heist. But it was more a blueprint, a skeleton that he was studying.

How did it normally go?

And then on his next route he found Johnny and explained how much he needed a job and Johnny frowned, face a little pink before agreeing to introduce Robby to his boss.

Robby found himself working in the kitchen. Which was a relief because he didn't not want to watch his parents work.

But what was nice about working in the kitchen, other than learning how to work in a commercial kitchen, was hanging out on breaks. He got to sit in the alleyway on an over turned milk crate while his mom smoked and complained to him about life, about her parents.

The first time had surprised him.

“Hey you’re new right?” she’d asked kicking at his crate with a heel.

“Yeah.”

“Work in the kitchens?”

“Yeah.”

“Weird I haven’t seen you?”

“How’s that weird? I work in the kitchens.”

“Yeah but you work the kitchens at a strip club. Most of the folks in there come out to watch. What, does a little skin make you nervous?”

“No, but also this is where we all work. I want to keep it professional. Plus my friend put his neck on the line to introduce me. So if I fuck up, I screw things up for him too.”

“Ooh who’s your friend?” She asked leaning down studying him curiously.

“Johnny.”

“Oh he’s cute! Hey, do you know if he’s single? Like if you’re friends you’d know if he was already married to some lady right?”

“He’s not dating anyone,” Robby said.

As far as he knew his dad wasn’t. The only potential would be if he was secretly dating Daniel but he doubted it.

He didn’t know why but it felt like this time round they hadn’t gotten as close as previous rounds. Like there was this…melancholy. The air around Johnny and Daniel had been electric. Whatever they’d hoped for, got out of their system in the other loops hadn’t happened.

Robby tried not to think too much about it.

“Think you could introduce me?” Shannon asked.

“Sure," Robby said.

No matter what he tried to change, as long as he was there, his mother came to him to talk about his dad, to ask about his dad, to find out if he was single so they could date.

His whole childhood he’d hoped to be able to hold both their hands, for them to get along at least for a little bit. But this was— he didn’t know how to handle it.

His dad flirted with his mom, his mom flirted with his dad.

He did not want to be there.

But he couldn’t drive a wedge in it without erasing himself form existence, so all there was was to hide in the kitchens and hope to move past it.

But it didn’t. So he tried again, this time inviting Daniel, hoping Daniel would maybe give Robby a buffer from all the flirting going on.

But it was like adding oil to the fire and standing close enough to singe his eyebrows.

He should’ve known better.

“It’s absolutely ridiculous,” Robby complained to Freddy, hiding outside in the alley.

Freddy was laughing, clutching his stomach.

“I can’t believe you thought bringing Daniel to the strip club your parents work at, on a night where Johnny has a routine was a good idea! I mean it’s a great idea in my opinion but for you? Terrible.”

Robby wanted to bang his head against the wall.

“Everything had been fine. I made Daniel a simple burger and fries. Gave him a good seat and told him we could all meet up later to catch up. And of course mom came over and had to say hi. And then she grabbed my arm as I was walking away, as soon as we were out of earshot and asked how on earth I’d found all these handsome men? Ugh. And then when I came back to get Daniel on my break so we could all go out after I saw him and my mom—”

“Making out?” Freddy asked sounding amused.

“No,” Robby said kicking at little pebble. “No, they were flirting with my dad.”

His dad had been coming out of his dressing room when his mom had popped up on one side and Daniel on the other and they’d both reached for him at the same time, caught the other reaching for him at the same time, and then both stood in closer and he’d thankfully hadn’t heard what they said but he watched his father turn red, watched them grab his hands and Robby bolted.

“How does this all affect Sam? Is she going to disappear or something?”

“Dunno, I don’t have anything from your time period to use like *Back to the Future,*” Freddy said.

Robby didn’t think he could live with that, a future without anyone he knew should’ve been in it, in it.

So he waited for the next loop to try and fix it.

Chapter 22

Robby was working 4 jobs. He did not *need* to be working four jobs. But he also **needed** to be working them.

Freddy would've told him to let the skateboarding shop go, but he couldn't leave Zak high and dry, not after how many times Zak had fed him and put a roof over his head and listened to him complain about things in an abstract. So he still pulled shifts when he could at Zak's shop. And he was working in the kitchen at the club.

And at Mr. Miyagi's bonsai shop.

And now…now he stood in a suit with Daniel at the car dealership, on his quest to keep the doors of Mr. Miyagi's Little Trees open by working another job.

It was a lot. And he hoped he wouldn't ever have to do it in his real life. But he was hoping to meet Mrs. LaRusso and ensure that she met Daniel and that Sam happened…and eventually Anthony…he supposed.

He had met all of the other women in Daniel's life. He'd met Ali, Kumiko and Jessica. And Amanda…Mandy was not what he was expecting. The Amanda he knew was sleek and fancy, always well put together and with a cutting edge.

This Mandy was always different. She stood out in LA where everyone was following fashion, and most of the women were wearing juicy couture or track suits and she was in jeans and layered tops and so many accessories.

And the first time Robby met her she scared the shit out of him.

He'd been teasing Daniel unaware that she was there, about why he was still driving the banana boat, because Daniel complained about all the repairs and it was a silly argument they had all the time, where it wasn't even an argument.

Daniel always explained he loved that car and he'd repair it a thousand times, even though he had complained all morning about the last bout of repairs. "Then just let it rest and get a new car with your discount," Robby said, something he knew Daniel couldn't afford. "Let it join all the other rust buckets."

But no sooner had he said that, grinning waiting for Daniel to tell him that there's no way he'd ever be able to let it rust because Mr. Miyagi had him out there waxing the cars on a schedule, he got pulled back, hard. Someone had grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked, pulling him back and into a wall hard and he saw Amanda. Mrs. LaRusso, young for the first time and pissed, a long painted nail dug into Robby's chest. "Leave Daniel and his car alone. It was a gift, you rich kids trade cars faster than you change your pants."

It had not been the first impression he'd expected, not when in her platform boots she towered over him.

"Mandy you came!" Daniel said before blinking and seeing the trap Robby had fallen into. "It's okay it's a joke. Robby lived in the same apartment complex as I did in Reseda. And he's working, shit what is it, 4 jobs right now? We're old friends, it's okay."

It was a rough loop. He always got in her way. He never meant to. But he got a black eye when she was throwing her arms out in excitement and he just happened to be where she couldn't see and he got elbowed in the face.

She'd stretch out and he'd be trying to carry a tray and land on his face. For a moment he thought it was because she didn't like him. But she always got so concerned over him, always cursed and then ran to get the ice pack.

He had no clue how she'd become so graceful. But he also couldn't believe most of what he'd witnessed until he had.

So it took some work, learning to dodge, to avoid, to watch his mouth until he got to know her and then it was surprising how fast they became friends, her arm thrown around him and for a minute she reminded him of Dutch, fun loving and a little wild.

And then he very carefully figured out how to draw them all together.

It ended up being easier than expected.

"Daniel said you have 4 jobs?"

"Yeah."

"I've been to the skateboard shop. And I know Mr. Miyagi's little trees, and there's the dealership, where else?"

“I work in a kitchen.”

“A restaurant? Oh that’s so cool! You gotta show us! Let’s eat there, is it expensive?”

“Not really,” Robby said. “Um but you gotta keep an…open mind.”

Maybe it was a poor choice to invite Amanda and Daniel to the club that loop. He hadn’t gotten Daniel there yet. But he put them in a booth hoping not to scare the shit out of his dad. But also too tired to really care. He just needed to see what happened, so after he finished cooking, after the food went out to the table he took over the bar.

He didn’t watch his parents dance. He never did. Instead he watched Daniel and Amanda.

It was odd. First they were enjoying their food and talking and laughing and then Amanda seemed to piece together where they were first. Her eyes widened and she grinned.

That hadn’t been the response Robby had expected while he passed a beer to one of the guys sitting at the counter.

No her body language had changed. She had turned to the stage and from the music he knew that his mother was dancing.

Slowly, eventually, Daniel realized Amanda wasn’t listening to him anymore as he continued to talk and he stopped talking and followed her gaze and took in the stage, took in the dancing and he frowned, like he was unhappy Robby hadn’t told him. And Robby *knew* that expression, he was about to get an earful from Daniel, chewed out for a trick that wasn’t a trick.

Robby yawned wondering if he could sleep through Daniel’s complaints when the music changed and Daniel sat up right, eyes widening and Robby wiped down the counter.

That would’ve been his dad. And now both Amanda and Daniel were paying attention, food forgotten.

Robby felt odd. He cleaned down the counter, he put things away, he poured a few drinks then went out to the back to breathe in the night air and to stretch and stare at the sky for as long as he could.

The music had come to an end, most of the customers stumbled their way away and he headed back in.

He heard laughter and he looked at the booth that Amanda and Daniel had been sitting in and he saw two blondes, his parents, sitting with them. They were talking, laughing and it was weird…*nice* to see them happy and Robby yawned again.

All he wanted was to find a nice place to sleep for a while.

He didn't want to disturb them so instead he walked back, around the back where he'd always gone as a kid, most of the women had already left and he picked a little corner, a chaise lounge.

He'd just rest his eyes for a bit and then he'd go home and he'd make dinner and maybe he'd read a bit more.

Chapter 23

The sun was bright and he could hear someone playing Bananarama's *Cruel Summer*. He rolled over hugging dresses to himself not wanting to see what time it was, not wanting to know how late he probably was to the dealership or what the boss was going to say when he found him asleep amongst all the drag dresses.

But he didn't care.

He was bone weary tired.

The music just got louder and he grumbled about how couldn't he get five more damn minutes?

He was working four jobs, just let him have some peace. Next loop he was going to sleep for a week.

When he opened his eyes a dragon was looking back at him. Neon green and soft looking with a little red tongue sticking out and comically small wings.

He didn't have a fucking clue where he was. He sat up with a sense of panic.

What had happened?

Had Silver had another bout of revenge?

Had he been kidnapped?

But why? What was the point?

Should he just find the nearest window to jump out of to restart the loop?

The walls were a spray painted with random designs and stencils. He was on a bed and the bedding was emerald and it was so damn soft that maybe if he had been kidnapped it was fine…at least for now.

A pair of glasses sat on the night stand next to a clock that read 8am. There was a lamp with a soccer ball as part of the base, stupidly cheesy. There was a desk which seemed to be buried under paper and random bits and bobs and a wall of books and Robby stared at it, squinting.

There was a window seat between the bookshelves and a skateboard leaning near the closet and Robby got up and nearly tripped over a soccer ball and some cleats.

He didn't know where he was.

There was a pack of cards on the bureau as he hurried out through the door into the hall, following the sound of the music, down a hall past other doors, He heard singing, *bad* singing and he stopped in the stairwell and just stared down.

Amanda was making coffee, espresso, and setting down a cup in front of Shannon who was laughing.

"You can sing better than that, stop singing so poorly. Do you want to wake up the whole house?"

"You said **wake 'em up**!" Johnny said. "Didn't she say wake them up? Besides it's Bananarama Sunday."

"You sang so much better at karaoke last week."

"Yeah that was with clients. Here? Caterwauling is fine," Johnny said.

"What are you doing? Did you fucking break? You're so weird."

He felt himself being pushed aside and he watched. He just stood standing on the stairwell watching as he was pushed past, brown hair bobbing past him.

"Where's Robby?"

"Being a spaz in the stairwell."

"Anthony!"

And then blue eyes were on him, and a look of concern and then his dad was walking towards him.

"You sleep okay?" Johnny asked softly.

"If I'm dreaming don't wake me," Robby whispered softly in Okinawan and Johnny blinked, studying him in surprise.

Johnny wrapped an arm around him and walked with him, away from the stairs, away from breakfast and outside.

The ground was tiled in colorful blues and Robby sat down and Johnny pulled out a pack of cards from his pocket.

“Nightmare?” Johnny asked softly, moving the cards with that practiced ease and then holding them out to Robby who sniffed, vision blurred but he reached for the cards anyway.

Johnny was so old now, no longer the teen or young man he'd gotten used to.

His hands had aged and a ring sat on his ring finger. A ring he recognized from so many afternoons at the mansion having tea and talking.

“Grandma’s ring,” Robby said softly.

“Yeah,” Johnny said taking the card back, shuffling. Every movement was all so smooth. “You dream about grandma?”

“Yeah,” Robby whispered, even though all the time he spent with Laura felt like a dear memory while this felt like he was dreaming. The most fragile gossamer dream that he feared would shatter if he held onto it too hard.

Johnny’s eyes got a little watery but he smiled. “I dream about her sometimes too. She loved you before you were born, would've loved you to pieces if she'd had the chance. This your card?”

Robby shook his head and Johnny reached out gently tapping his chest and Robby looked in the shirt pocket of his pajama top and pulled out his card, a king of hearts, that same card from so long ago. He launched himself forward straight at Johnny, grabbing hold of him and sobbing into his shoulder and Johnny held him, smoothing his hair.

“Did I fuck it up? Wrong card?” Johnny asked.

“It was right,” Robby managed.

Johnny didn’t pry, didn’t ask anything else, just rubbed Robby’s back as he cried and held him.

It wasn’t Johnny that he’d fought or that he’d fought along side, that he’d gotten to know. It was his dad. Truly his dad and it’d been so long since he’d seen him.

“What did you do?” Daniel asked.

“Nothing Mr. LaRusso,” Robby said hugging his dad harder.

“Well shit, what did *I* do?” Daniel said.

Robby looked at him to see the surprise on his face, to see his mother’s surprised face.

“Dad got *mister’d*. Must’ve been because you didn’t make it to his soccer game tournament.”

“I had *your* video game tournament Anthony. We had to divide and conquer. You all are in too many things. Things that didn’t exist when I was a kid.”

“Maybe he’s so upset he’s going to stay with Mom this week.”

“Hey!” Daniel said.

“What? We’d love to have him any time,” Shannon said.

“Besides he’s *supposed* to have spent **part** of the break at the batting cages with me, but nooo you had to fly to Italy this summer,” Amanda said.

“I’m sorry summer in Ohio or a summer in Italy? Of course he and Sam came with us.”

“Well they missed out on the batting cages.”

“Yeah and Mom got into a bar fight,” Anthony said.

Johnny laughed. “Somehow you forgot to tell us about that Amanda.”

“Oh not me,” Amanda said. “I behaved myself. Shannon’s the one who beat up Elizabeth Anne Rooney.”

“She’s a bitch,” Shannon said. “Always has been.”

“Shannon!” Daniel said, but there was no barb to it and he was laughing.

Robby pried himself away from his father’s shoulder with a confused frown, looking at Anthony.

He called Robby’s mom…mom. That didn’t make any sense.

“Hey what happened to Bananaramam Sunday?” Sam asked walking out looking up from her phone for half a second.

“We’re taking a family break,” Johnny said.

“From family breakfast?” Sam asked quirking an eyebrow. “What’s next we’re going to take a break from the end of summer family monster truck show to break watermelons with tornado kicks?”

“Well we *could*,” Johnny said amused.

“No no, we already booked the tickets for the monster truck rally. Besides tornado kicks stay in the dojo,” Daniel said.

“I thought anywhere and anything could be a dojo,” Anthony said.

“That my dear was when he was trying to get you to join him at the dojo and before he broke our favorite vase.”

“Hey don’t look at me,” Johnny said. “I’m the one who said we should have an *actual* dojo. Not all of us studied in a garden.”

“And what does any of this have to do with breakfast? I thought we were having bananarama chocolate chip pancakes. I mean I listened to everyone’s awful singing of the song, I came downstairs, where are they?”

“On the table,” Johnny said.

He then shifted, cupping Robby’s face in his hands. “We can sit here some more if you like, but if you’re hungry you know how Sam gets. Especially on a date day.”

“I do not!” Sam said.

“Wait? I never noticed that,” Shannon said. “Why do you eat a bigger breakfast before meeting up with Miguel?”

“Because their dates are workout buddy dates,” Amanda said. “She’s made it her goal to kick his ass during every date.”

Hands gently patted his shoulder and back, ruffled his hair as everyone else went back inside, but Johnny stayed.

His dad stayed and sat with him.

“Last day of summer always gets to me too,” Johnny said softly,

passing the deck of cards over to Robby. “Though it’s also…kind of our anniversary, so for a while I warmed up to it, but now that you kids go back to school it’s back to being a bummer.”

Robby took the pack of cards, doing the card shuffling Laura had taught him so long ago.

“Do you want to go to the Castle today? Just you and me?” Johnny asked. “Or you want to take your board in for a tuneup?”

“With Zak?” Robby asked.

“Yeah, you usually help him out over the summer but we’ve been gone all summer, we didn’t do any of our usual stuff. So how about breakfast we go, just us?”

“I’d like that.”

“Oh by the way you got a letter,” Johnny said reaching into his jacket and pulling out an envelope.

“You go ahead, I’ll give this a read and then…then I’ll join everyone for pancakes,” Robby said.

Johnny nodded, kissing the top of Robby’s head and then heading back as they started up the Bananarama again with *Love in the First Degree*.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Robert Swayze Keene,

Gotta use your full name some times you know?

You know what? I've written this about 20 times.

That's **it.**

20.

You scared the shit out of me disappearing on me. I was coming by to visit the club, you'd told me your plans to introduce your parents to the LaRusso's and I found you asleep in the back room and right when I was about to wake you up, your parents laughing and having a grand old time out in the front of the shop you went poof.

I thought maybe you went back through the loop first and I waited for that tell tale sound of the creak of the gate. But it didn't happen. So I walked out, feeling like someone walked over my grave and chatted with the foursome in the club.

You didn't tell me everything you did, which I consider vastly unfair. But I did eventually figure it out. And I think I was right.

It was me.

I mean that's how time loops generally work right?

Trap someone who needs to change and grow?

I just had done so much that I hadn't realized it. I mean I won a peace prize, so why should I change? What had I done that could possibly be so wrong?

But then after you left I rode out that route a little more, watching your parents, surprised at how happy they were and I thought a lot about you all and my place in it. And that inkling of a feeling I'd gotten after talking to you that I just hadn't wanted to come to terms with.

That summer in 1984 I'd been pissed.

I hated living in Reseda. I hated that pool was never full, that the owner never fixed up the damn place. I hated school, I mean I had friends but I hated that Johnny was King Cobra and living it up in the hills in a fancy mansion when we'd gone to the same elementary school and he'd…become so damn cool. How was that fair? We'd played in the same damn sandbox ate the same after school snacks, had the same worn down sneakers with holes in them and patched up clothes. We hadn't been close but we'd come from the same spot and I was jealous of his wealth, or wealth I'd assumed he'd had, his popularity, his strength and that he'd gotten Ali.

Everyone loved Ali. Hell I'm pretty sure Susan loved her too. She was the prettiest, nicest girl in school and then she picked Johnny. Johnny and his stupid sweaters and fancy convertible car as if he'd completely shed where he'd come from. That once upon a time he'd been scrawny and weak like the rest of us, and a nerd.

He and Ali had been the king and queen of the school and I was twistedly pleased when they broke up.

But I wanted to rub salt in that wound.

I used Daniel as a pawn.

I hated how chatty he was, that the silent last day of summer when I had planned to go walk down to get ice cream and go spend my summer job money on a new 8 track I wanted but instead it was spent with me getting hit in the face with that damn gate and listening to him blabber on and on about nothing and then being so freaking hopeful. Do you know how many people wind up in LA with hopes and dreams? Not to mention how many fucking tourists?

You might be thinking, Freddy, why the hell didn't you just ignore him then? Because of Mrs. Milo. She was such a snitch. If I wasn't nice in front of her to the new people who'd just moved in, or a gentleman then I'd have been given hell about it for weeks form my parents because Mrs. Milo was the nosiest gossipy neighbor. My senior year would've been ruined before it started.

So when an opportunity presented itself for me to get revenge, two birds with one stone, I took it. The school was pretty sure Ali and Johnny would get back together. Like truly. Everyone thought it. Like some dumb fairy tale but no one but me knew that Johnny was Cinderella and I wanted that pumpkin carriage he was riding in to get

squashed so he'd be forced to come back down to earth like the rest of us. (Please enjoy the pun, I did read your joke books that one loop)

So I pushed Daniel in the mix. I told him Ali had been looking at him. That that girl he'd spotted was someone he might have a chance with in a way to make him go over even though he doubted it. Even though I knew Ali was nice but probably not that ready to go for someone new. The welcome committee she was for sure, on the market, not really.

But it was a seed and it took root and then there was Johnny and it all worked better than I planned. They fought and I pushed Daniel back into the fight every chance I got. Because there was something thrilling about seeing blood in the sand, it made me feel better to see them fighting, two fools who just kept going and all they needed was the right push, the right crowd to be around them to keep them from cooling down and walking off. Even Ali couldn't stop them. I felt better about that damn gate and I forgot all about it. I watched them skirmish from the side lines, like it was all for my entertainment, feeling like I understood why people showed up at coliseums to watch gladiators.

At the All-Valley I went because who wouldn't want to see that fight? The new kid versus the king? No matter what happened it'd be the show of the entire school year. I mean we went every year and it's why I didn't personally mess with your father. I knew what his bite looked like. And I was impressed when Daniel won despite being injured, that my friends and I ran down to join in the congratulations, the excitement of it because to me it had been truly the best show around. I didn't give a shit that Daniel's knee had been hurt, that they'd hurt each other that badly. It didn't change how school went for me. I didn't suddenly become best friends with Daniel. I didn't pay any more attention to them, too focused on my own life. I graduated and forgot all about it. I didn't realize the ripple effect it had until, decades later, I got stuck in this damn loop.

I admit to my hand in it, but you do have to admit that both Johnny and Daniel can be hot headed and stubborn. It wasn't much of a push needed to get them wound up. It was so easy. I just didn't realize… well I didn't realize they *liked* each other until you pointed it out. Though it makes sense, looking back at it now.

So here's what I did to make the loop work.

I welcomed Daniel to the neighborhood, complained about my face

getting hit with the gate to air out the grievance and he took me up to his ma and gave me an ice pack and some lemonade and apologized. Lucille LaRusso is a truly nice host and that opened the newest door to me. Rather than grit and bare the pain of it all, my family and the LaRusso's started having dinners together and when the job at the computer shop went under my family helped her find a new computer place so she didn't work such weird hours at the restaurant. But that was later. After lemonade and an ice pack and both LaRusso's fussing over my face to make sure it hadn't swollen I offered to show Daniel around a bit.

I walked him down to that parking lot your dad was in, just wandering around and exploring and then I said hi to Johnny who had been sitting there listening to music, he'd taken his jacket off and you could see the bruises on his arms. He seemed so surprised and embarrassed to see me. But he and Daniel hit it off real fast. We hung out and I hate to say it but it was nice.

I don't know what Johnny and Daniel did but eventually I went back home and my mom didn't chew me out for bitching to Daniel for hitting me in the face with the gate. Instead she told me she was pretty proud of the way I'd not let myself get stepped over but also how I'd moved past it, how I built bridges and we never, in all the loops I went through, had that conversation. I cried, not ashamed to admit that. There's something about a parent noticing your hard work and growth even if you're nearly a couple hundred years old.

I then went to get Daniel for the beach party and that went the way it usually did but I didn't push Daniel at Ali. He interacted her because our ball went over, but he didn't really flirt. He still got into a fight with Johnny but…it was more like they were sizing each other up rather than really fighting. And Ali grabbed the both of them, walked down the beach and chewed them out for fighting on the last day of summer before senior year. I think it's because we weren't pushing them towards one another, so the cobras weren't either. Like I stepped between a couple of them and none of them grabbed her and when she got up in Daniel and Johnny's faces they backed down.

I didn't see them fight much beyond that. I mean Daniel flirted ***badly***. I wouldn't have ever realized that was his flirting style if you hadn't pointed it out. He wound Johnny up every chance he got. But the teeth and claws or I guess for your father, fangs, between the two weren't quite there. But Daniel was lonely still, which was hard because Mr. Miyagi is a lynchpin and I didn't know the best way to balance that and ensure he spent time with Mr. Miyagi. So I kept busy

with my friends but remained friendly and that seemed to have worked. So he and Mr. Miyagi bonded over bonsai and karate books and the old man ended up teaching him karate. Not to defend himself, but because he wanted to impress someone.

I think the old man knew who.

You thought their flirting was bad. When it came to sparring it was worse. They still did the all-valley, Daniel still won. But no hit to the knee. Bobby got third place because of it and Johnny his second.

Kreese still tried to kill him but Mr. Miyagi stopped him, though he had to also keep Daniel from trying to kill Kreese. Wild how defensive he gets of Johnny once he realized it wasn't hate but that he liked the guy.

We graduated, we all lost touch.The last thing I'd heard was that Johnny got his road trip with his friends and Daniel. I've included some photos.

Robby flipped through the pages until he pulled out a stack of photos and he saw a picture of his dad smiling, leaning against a motorcycle, surrounded by the cobras and Daniel with his arm thrown around his shoulder and Dutch's grinning. Daniel had a fading black eye. They were standing in front of a sign for Weed California. There were a few more photos, one in front of the golden gate bridge, some of them camping, Daniel telling a story in front of a fire while Johnny and the guys ate marshmallows, photos in Portland at a little roadside diner, in front of the mountains outside of Seattle, with some Mounties over the border in Canada, in front of the steam clock in Vancouver, enjoying the northern lights.

Robby smiled softly to himself as he looked at each of them, flipping over and reading his fathers hand writing and the date before turning back to the letter.

It took a while to gather all the details. But it seems like Daniel finally found out where those bruises your dad had came from and when they were supposed to go on that trip got into a fight with Sid who had said Johnny couldn't go because Sid wanted Johnny working on the lot and to stay out of trouble before sending him off to business school, which Johnny didn't want to do. It seems like no matter what happened Johnny and Sid got into a fight after graduation and that's what usually sent him underground, him getting kicked out. This time though Daniel had just gotten back from Okinawa, had just lost the

apartment complex and won a fight to the death and was in no mood for abusive old men and called Sid a coward and some curse words in Italian and Sid clocked him and Daniel knocked him out.

When they got back Daniel opened Little Trees rather than going to college with Mr. Miyagi and Johnny went home only to find himself kicked out. Sid wouldn't even let him talk to his mother, just had the staff put all of his stuff in his car and not let him in. Thankfully he went right where I knew he'd go, that apartment above the pizza place and he started working at the club.

I got a job working at the same club your parents met at and I saved up to get myself a car.

I invited Daniel and Amanda to come have dinner at the club after I bought my car as thanks for getting me such a good deal and that truly is what cinched it.

It took me a while to figure out what happened and this is where your life might be a bit confusing to you. But I think Amanda started by dating Daniel and Shannon your father and then I think Amanda and Shannon got to talking and Shannon and Daniel got to talking and realized they were all interested in the same thing. The hold out, or the person they weren't sure about was your dad. Your dad who'd had his heart crushed a couple times and so every time I saw them they were flirting up a storm with your dad.

Amanda would come by and bring him coffee in the morning and kiss him on the cheek leaving behind a bit of red and squeeze his arm. Shannon danced with him during the nights. Daniel brought him lunch and took him out to dinner when they could afford it or to Mr. Miyagi's to eat together.

And eventually some of that tension that had been there since Kreese tried to kill him seemed to fade and then before I knew it Amanda and Shannon were pregnant. Not at the same time…or maybe I don't really know the full details. And when your grandmother got sick… Daniel ran up to the hospital to be with your mother with Amanda sitting with Johnny and then they'd trade.

All the parenting things they did together. And Daniel called in your uncles and they came and they helped. Dutch didn't end up in jail quite so often because he spent a lot of time chasing after you and Sam, he had his hands too full to get into trouble. And Daniel made it a mission to ensure he got anything Johnny should've gotten that

Laura had left behind for him. I hadn't realized all he'd gotten from Sid were those owls of his and a photo. When that's all Sid tried to give him, Johnny accepted those with a sort of heart wrenching despair and every time I saw him he was hugging those owls to his chest or just holding onto them. Which pissed Daniel off to no end that that was it. That it couldn't be it so he and your uncles and Amanda and Mr. Miyagi pooled their resources together to get a lawyer to obtain a copy of Laura's will and then chewed out your grand-stepfather because they found out that Laura had left money behind for Johnny as well as a bunch of other random things. Johnny used the money later to buy a place, for a while he didn't know what to do with it and didn't touch it. But later they got the place you're living in now. Mostly because he wanted you to have the space to run and play and your own space. He said he didn't need much and would've kept living in that studio above the pizza place if it was just him."

Robby flipped the page and saw a picture of his dad asleep with a baby on his chest and when he flipped it over he recognized the handwriting. Not his father's, not his mother's but Daniel's.

Robby and Johnny nap time.

There was another of his dad holding him while Dutch tried to feed him. In the background Jimmy, Tommy and Bobby were talking and cooking something and Daniel was fast asleep, head against the kitchen table, a red cobra kai jacket draped around his shoulders.

Guys night Was written in his father's handwriting.

There was another photo of him and Sam, he assumed, sitting in Mr. Miyagi's garden, his mom had her hair up and was covered in dirt but smiling at Amanda who was brandishing proudly a giant carrot. Daniel was in the background with Johnny, leaning against the fence with a beer, talking and gesturing and grinning while his dad was frowning and painting the fence, a bit of paint on his cheek. Mr. Miyagi was sitting with him and Sam, the old man looking happier than Robby had ever seen him. Lucille was carrying out sandwiches on a tray.

Family gardening was written in his mothers handwriting.

It was a little confusing for a bit for me but they cleared it up when they got married and after the LaRusso auto's really took off.

Amanda as co-owner bought her own place a block or so down and

she and Shannon got married first chance they got. At the wedding party I asked how they'd…well ended up together and Amanda had never been so turned on by watching someone dance before and being so comfortable in their own skin. And your mother said she'd known when Amanda had been there holding her hair back while she went through withdrawal and drove her to every meeting and to rehab. She said she'd thought that she wouldn't see them again because she'd failed but every time there was a chance to visit Amanda was there with some treat and so much gossip and would hold her hand and flirt up a storm and make everyone else in the place jealous. She felt loved and cared for and wanted in a way she'd been looking for and supported. I'm sure if you ask for the story you'll get plenty of other reasons they love each other.

So I waited for Johnny and Daniel, assuming based off of everything you said they'd be next. But holy shit did it take a while. They didn't until after Anthony was born. I got so drunk I demanded they tell me why they waited so long at their wedding party.

'I wanted him to have his mom's ring, but I had to fight Sid for it,' Daniel said.

Your dad's excuse? He hadn't been thinking about marriage, he'd been too busy running after kids and working.

Where you might ask?

The Castle. Your dad's one of the magicians at the Magic Castle. Apparently doing magic tricks for me and Daniel in 1984 re-sparked his interest in it and he buckled down to learn them and would do his tricks for Daniel on dates when he got nervous or overwhelmed, apparently a lot. And he practiced a lot at the club I just didn't know that.

Daniel now has a rule no magic tricks in the bedroom.

You and Sam fought over who got to be the flower child and you ended up sharing it. It was truly very cute.

Robby found a picture of himself in a familiar looking powder blue suit, and a little girl matching him and they were both wearing sunglasses.

He spotted Mr. Miyagi behind them grinning and Robby smiled reading on.

Your dad met Miguel about two years ago while stopping to sneak some pizza from the convenience store on the way home. Daniel thinks that store bought and California pizza is garbage and prefers making it from scratch but because Johnny lived above a pizza place for so long sometimes he just wants not homemade pizza.

Miguel asked him to teach him karate and they opened the dojo after that.

I advised him against naming it Cobra Kai. And your dad and Daniel put their heads together to try and name it something else.

I gave a recommendation.

Johnny loves it.

Daniel hates it.

But it's what Johnny does when he's not working at the club doing stage magic or with Zak. And Daniel? Well he's been thinking of leaving LaRusso Auto to Amanda and Shannon and find something else.

He's been doing more cooking, a lot of the time with you and Anthony. He's also been gardening a lot. I wouldn't be surprised if he opens up his own restaurant soon.

But financially they're good. Your grandmother left Johnny a shit-ton of money. Where it was in the original round? Sid had it. He used it whenever he bailed Johnny out of jail or whatever else but seemed to decide Johnny shouldn't get Laura's money. He refused to part with it most of the time. But damn your grandmother was good at cards. So if you choose to go to college you're set. So is Sam and Anthony.

You've been doing soccer a lot, you've been in some skating tournaments, done some junior magic shows, and even tried your hand at surfing. Shannon and your Dad are usually there, sometimes everyone else.

Mr. Miyagi taught you the basics of your karate and then you also studied with your dad and uncles. You competed some as a kid and now you and Miguel study together at the dojo with Sam. Anthony still doesn't care about it, him and Shannon play every video game under the sun.

You haven't met Tory yet, but you know, keep an eye out for her and

Kenny. Her mom gets sick and you and Johnny know how that goes. As does Daniel, that's the only warning I think I can give.

I'll see you around. I teach at the school. Science is what I picked. I wanted to live my best Doc Brown life. Sometimes you help me with experiments, just like Marty McFly. Only a little different.

I wish you and your family all the best. Your dads' and your mom's. And thanks. Watching you try and find other things I never would've because I was so mad, watching you learn to care for yourself again and find ways to grow helped me find peace. It made me closer to my own family and gave me life long friends. I saw too much of myself in you, too many little things that I'd never given myself a chance for just like you hadn't. So enjoy this. I think we're finally in it for the long run.

All the best, your Doc Brown (thank you and sorry)

Freddy Fernandez

Robby carefully folded up the letter and put it and the photos away and took a deep breath. He remembered everything and it was weird because he also remembered things that were new.

He remembered being a kid at Mr. Miyagi's, helping him garden, helping him clean cars. He remembered his car, one of Mr. Miyagi's that his dads…that was right…*dads* weren't particularly happy with due to safety features.

He remembered fighting with Sam over uncrustables.

He remembered playing video games all night with Anthony and his mom.

He remembered meeting Miguel and listening to music with him in the back of his dad's car.

He remembered Mr. Miyagi's funeral. He remembered the way Daniel shut down for a bit after that and the way his dad sat with him, arm around him, hugging him.

He remembered being in the kitchen with Sam and his dad and the three of them trying their hardest to make Mr. Miyagi's favorite dishes for Daniel. He remembered the way Daniel had cried when they'd brought it to him and the way he'd hugged them all so damn tight.

He remembered school. He remembered that he'd met Trey and Cruz, but in passing because they didn't go to the same school or at least not the same high school. He remembered summers at his grandparents… all three sets. But never Sid. The only memory he had of Sid was holding Daniel's hand and being very small while Daniel cursed him out in Italian demanding the things that Daniel had found in Laura's will that were rightfully Johnny's that he hadn't give originally even though he had been legally ordered to. Not just the money. But the ring. The things she'd left for him. He remembered Daniel asking the old man if they were going to have to fight again because he didn't want to do that in front of his son. Later apologizing to him.

"Fuck him," Robby had said. And Daniel had blinked in surprise while buckling him into his car seat and then burst out laughing.

"You are your father's son. Just promise me you're not going to repeat anything I said to Nonna Lucille huh? I will never hear the end of it."

They'd pinky promised and he remembered how happy Daniel had looked looking down at that ring he'd managed to get from Sid without having to fight the guy.

He carefully stood up and stretched walking towards breakfast. He was getting good grades. He'd done well at the last karate tournament, joining for fun with Hawk, Demetri, Miguel, Sam and Aisha.

It was Sunday.

It was bananarama chocolate chip pancake Sunday. With soft music playing while his parents, blood and not, sat around the table, with a spot waiting for him, with his siblings enjoying breakfast. And after breakfast, after Sam left to go pick up Miguel for their date, he and his dad would go to the magic castle for a bit and he'd study what new tricks there were to learn, and then they'd hang out with Zak at the shop and he'd work on his board and prep for the next skating tournament.

Then they'd meet his uncles for dinner and Daniel would join them and it'd be guys night and it'd feel weird he *knew*, because he knew them differently now, but it'd be nice because it was family. Then he'd come home and he'd go to his room, his **own** room, and pick a book off his shelf or unearth is laptop from all his summer projects and souvenirs from Italy and he go to sleep in his own bed. And in a few weeks they'd have their annual back to school barbecue at his mom's home down the block and his friends would come, as would Anthony's

and Samantha's and any new kid at school and they'd swim in the pool and just enjoy being teens, being kids still.

And he'd enjoy being home and the life he had now, and then he'd ask Mr. Fernandez a bazillion questions when he got to school in the new year and he'd keep an eye out for Kenny and he'd try not to be too nervous meeting Shawn who wouldn't know him. And he'd give Tory a warm welcome and he'd keep them all close and safe. There'd be mistakes, but they'd be new ones and he wasn't quite as worried about it as he used to be.

He didn't have to be perfect. He pulled out a chair, his chair from the dining room table and reached for heaps of food off the plates, not as a guest in the LaRusso household, but in his own home, surrounded by his family, where he belonged and was loved, and knew he was loved with a warm sense of security and comfort.

"Hey, you're squinting. Did you forget your contacts?"

"Did you run out?"

"I can pick some up on the way back later."

"No I just rushed down I forgot to put any in," Robby said, smiling softly at the attention from his parents. The offer. Knowing he didn't have to make those calls himself, that he didn't have to worry about a place to sleep, that someone had paid the utility bill or that there was food in the fridge, or that somewhere out there were some old men out for revenge for Cobra Kai. They were out there, but those sleeping snakes were still sleeping, and there wasn't a karate war to worry about, or broken backs and juvie to haunt him.

He could feel their smiles more than see them and he felt lighter than air, and couldn't wait to skate later at Zak's, he was so sure he'd fly.

Chapter End Notes

> Time loops are hard, especially when you want to encapsulate so much. There is a lot of logistics lol. I'd honestly been wanting to write this for a long time, because when I thought of a time loop and how I'd do it for TKK/CK I wanted to do something weird. I didn't want the person trapped in the time loop to be Johnny or Daniel, I wanted it to be someone else, someone unexpected and I decided after who knows which rewatch of the first film (I should have it memorized at this point) that it should be Freddy. Because I found his actions after very close inspection of the first film to

be very...interesting. To an extent I could see beyond Johnny and Daniel, he could take some of the blame for the eventual ripple effect of the whole karate soap opera. So I thought it'd be fun to make him have to redo time loops and wonder why on earth he was stuck in a time loop, why so much of it had to do with Daniel and Johnny only to very very later realize he had to play, to an extent, cupid.

I found that outsider looking in very intriguing. Especially if they really did not want to do it. A begrudging cupid.

I'd also been wanting to write about Robby and I wanted to make a gift for a friend who loves Back to the Future and I realized I could put these ideas together and make a very different time loop/time travel fic and that would give some space between the torment Freddy was living in and an exploration that would allow Robby to get to know his Dad and Daniel in a different light. And it was the perfect spark to get going, to explore the 80s from a present pov, and from Robby who had had such a rough time and use those loops to both break apart, fall a further into his feelings and heal and understand everyone a little differently before getting his happy ending.

So thank you for reading I hope you enjoyed it!

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